

Creating a Trauma-Informed Environment for Children

AMY NITZA, Ph.D.
DIRECTOR



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Caring for Yourself While Caring for Others: Self-Care and Stress Inoculation
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Agenda

- Impact of Trauma on Children
 - Trauma & the Brain
 - Trauma Symptoms
 - Influences on Children's Reactions
- Creating a Trauma-Informed Environment
 - Principles
 - Strategies

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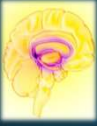
Impact of Trauma on Children

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All trauma-related behaviors make sense when understood in the context in which they arose...

They are *adaptive responses* to terrible situations.


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The Emotional Brain

The monitor of danger; the alarm system of the brain

- Judge of what is pleasurable or scary
- Arbiter of what is, or is not, important for survival purposes
- Makes quick decisions, but is not fine-tuned
- Develops first; heavily shaped by early experiences



The Rational Brain

Focused on understanding and thinking about the world around us

- Responsible for the interpretation of all our experiences
- Regulates executive functions:
 - Planning and decision making
 - Sequencing and predicting consequences of our actions
 - Keeps us from acting on all our impulses
- Slower than the emotional brain, but more fine-tuned

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The Smoke Alarm & The Watchtower

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First, the emotional brain (the smoke detector) detects a potential threat (i.e. a stressor)

Next, the rational brain (the watchtower) examines the potential threat, decides on a plan of action, and activates that plan


Then, the emotional brain (the smoke detector) returns to baseline and continues monitoring

(Van der Kolk, 2015)

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In Daily Life

Managing stress relies on a healthy balance between the emotional and rational parts of the brain.



With Traumatic Stress

→ The smoke alarm is constantly going off - suggesting danger; it gets stuck in the 'on' position.

→ The brain becomes out of balance; the watchtower is overwhelmed by the smoke alarm.

→ All the brain's attention gets focused on trying to shut off the smoke alarm, at the expense of other brain functions.

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"After trauma, the world is experienced with a different nervous system. Its energy is focused on suppressing the inner chaos and avoiding new threats at the expense of living in the present."

(Van der Kolk, 2015)

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Acute Trauma Reactions

Emotional

Two extremes:
Feeling too much or too little
(Overwhelmed or Numbing)
Fear becomes reactivated and generalized
Emotional Dysregulation

Cognitive

Trauma challenges basic assumptions and beliefs about life
Initial symptoms stem from rational brain being high-jacked
Later symptoms stem from searching for an explanation
Self-fulfilling prophecies: acting on their irrational beliefs in such a way to make them come true

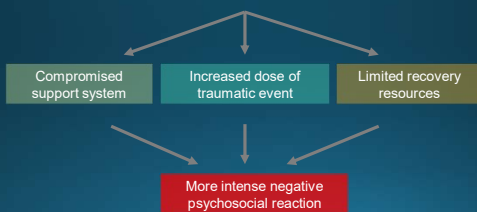
Behavioral/Physical

Behaviors to manage the intensity of emotions
Avoidant behaviors
Regression
Physical symptoms may not appear to be connected to the trauma
Hyperarousal and sleep disturbances

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Characteristics of Children's Increased Vulnerability

Mediating Factors



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Secondary Stressors:
How Has the Event Changed Other Aspects of Children's Lives?

- Are there changes in caregiver functioning/relationship/availability?
- Do caregivers feel capable of handling the child's reactions?
- Do caregivers perceive they have the resources & support that they need?
- Is relocation or separation occurring from caregivers or support system?
- Are they forced to take on new responsibilities?
- Has there been other disruption?
 - Moving, changing schools, losing belongings, etc.
- Has it increased their exposure to conflict, abuse, or vulnerable situations?

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Influences on the Intensity of the Response

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Creating a Trauma-Informed Environment

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Principles of a Trauma-Informed Environment

- ✓ Promoting sense of safety
- ✓ Promoting calm
- ✓ Promoting connectedness
- ✓ Promoting sense of efficacy (self and collective)
- ✓ Instilling hope

(Hobfoll, et al., 2007)

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Promoting Safety

- Goal: Provide a sense of real and perceived safety that allows children to begin the process of healing and recovery.

Continuity Principle: Because trauma disrupts how we understand our world and live our lives, responses should focus on restoring and maintaining the continuities in a child's life.

- A warm and welcoming environment
- Predictable routines
- Reassuring children that they are safe
- Protecting children from ongoing reminders of the disaster

Important during and in the immediate aftermath of the event, and at points of change and transition

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Promoting a Sense of Calm

- Goal 1: Reduce the over-activation of the emotional brain
 - Deactivate the fight-flight-freeze reaction, or the 'smoke alarm'
- Goal 2: Develop a variety of self-soothing and emotion-regulation strategies

- **Modeling:**
 - Using a calm voice
 - Being patient and tolerant
 - Listening calmly
- **Using soothing strategies like calm music, etc.**
- **Teaching emotion regulation activities**
 - Relaxation
 - Mindfulness

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Promoting Efficacy

- **Goal 1: Restore personal efficacy**
Children's belief that they are capable of exerting control or mastery over their environment, or to achieve desired outcomes, and overcome challenges
- **Goal 2: Restore collective efficacy**
Children's belief that that their group (family, classroom, school, community) is capable of achieving goals or overcoming challenges through coordinated action
- **Self-regulation and coping skills**
Soothing, problem-solving, etc.
- **Autonomy, choice, and control**
Assigning age-appropriate tasks
Age-appropriate and achievable options and decisions
Communicating trust and confidence in the child's skills and strengths
- **Altruism**
Opportunities for children to help and support others promotes mastery and competence

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Promoting Connectedness

- **Goal: Combat the negative impact of social disruptions such as school closings by promoting opportunities for cohesion and belonging**
 - in small groups
 - in classrooms/schools
 - throughout a community
- **Strong empirical support for the positive effects of:**
Sustained connection to attachment figures
Receipt of social support from loved ones and social groups
- **Examples:**
Girl Scout Troop "Fireside Chats"
UNICEF USA Kid Power videos

Perceived support appears to be more important than received support

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Instilling Hope

- **Goal: Combat the sense of hopelessness that has followed the disruption in daily life, relationships, and future plans**
- Promoting safety, calm, efficacy, and connectedness all contribute to the instillation of hope
- Restoration of regular routines, enjoyable activities, and other evidence of 'normalcy'
- Highlighting successes, progress, and growth
- Asking children about their goals for the future
- Helping them make plans for pursuing those goals in the altered new reality

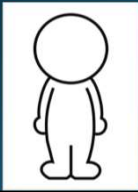
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Strategies for a Trauma-Informed Environment for Children

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Strategy 1 Opportunities to identify emotions

Children may not have words to identify all the emotions and sensations they are experiencing. Helping them do so promotes empowerment, mastery, and efficacy.



- Activities to name emotions in themselves or others
 - Feelings 'charades'
 - 'How are you feeling today?' activities
 - Identifying how characters in stories might be feeling
- Younger students might be better able to identify physical sensations rather than emotions.
 - E.g. – Asking "How do you feel inside?"
 - E.g. - Using an outline of a person, ask them to color in the parts where they feel bad or sad.



Children should be invited, but never forced, to share.

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Strategy 2 Opportunities for self-expression

Just like with identifying feelings, self-expression promotes empowerment, mastery, and efficacy. When children are able to 'tell their story', it helps them integrate it as a narrative into their life experience in a more healthy way. They may need to do this multiple times.



- Creating moments of expression by:
 - Writing (Journal, poetry, article, ...)
 - Drawing
 - Singing & Dancing
 - Play
- Opportunities for students to share their work, ideas, and creations with others.

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Strategy 3

Validating children's emotions & thoughts

Children (and all people) benefit from having their thoughts and feelings validated, even if there is nothing that can be done to 'fix' the problem.

Be prepared to listen, but don't push children to talk. It can be unhelpful when someone isn't ready to confront their memories.

- These phrases express empathy and help you make sure you understand what the child is trying to say:
 - "So you really feel..."
 - "I hear you saying..."
 - "It sounds like..."
 - "It seems to you..."
- It's ok to get it wrong – clarifying can be helpful.

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Expressing Empathy

Phrases to Avoid

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| ✗ "Don't feel bad." | ✗ "I know how you feel." |
| ✗ "Don't cry." | ✗ "It's God's will." |
| ✗ "Try not to think about it." | ✗ "It could be worse." |
| ✗ "Let's talk about something else." | ✗ "At least you still have...." |
| | ✗ "At least [anything]." |

Well intended but...
may feel dismissive or invalidating to the child.

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Strategy 4

Use relaxation exercises

- Relaxation exercises help students focus on their breath and their body.
- By focusing and taking control of their breathing and muscles, they can control their anxiety and other overwhelming feelings.
- Being relaxed physically helps them focus on learning.



e.g. *The Elephant & the Fly*



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Strategy 5

Use mindfulness exercises

- Trauma symptoms are distracting; they are constant reminders of the trauma and cause students to 'relive' the traumatic event.
- Mindfulness helps children keep their awareness in the present and reduce overwhelming emotions (anxiety, fear, stress and anger).
- It promotes emotional self-regulation and well-being.

By using easy and quick mindfulness exercises on a **regular daily basis**, children can significantly reduce stress, trauma symptoms and negative thoughts and also increase their memory, their self-esteem and their compassion for others.



A daily 2 minute exercise is enough for seeing all these improvements!

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Strategy 6

Encouraging good coping skills

- Inviting (and/or teaching) them to:
 - Talk to someone they trust
 - Ask for the information they want
 - Rest, eat healthy and exercise
 - Do positive and distracting activities (sport, hobbies, reading)
 - Maintain a schedule
 - Take breaks
 - Use relaxation and mindfulness methods
 - Keep a journal
 - Focus on things that they can control
 - Use coping methods that have been successful in the past



- The goal is that they have a range of skills they can choose and use to fit different situations.
- Having them practice these skills makes it more likely they will use them in a crisis.
- Remind them that:
 - It is natural to be upset for some period of time; it is ok to feel the way they feel
 - They can expect to feel better over time

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Strategy 7

Helping Adults Help Kids

- 1) Offering appropriate reassurance
- 2) Answering children's questions
- 3) Psychoeducation: Understanding developmental needs and responses



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1) Offering Appropriate Reassurance

Just like adults, children benefit from:

- Acknowledgement and validation they've experienced a stressful or traumatic experience
- Assurance that their stress reactions are understandable
- If the significance of the experience is downplayed by helpers or others, children may not feel they have 'permission' to allow themselves to recover

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1) Offering Appropriate Reassurance

- Remember that children lack adult perspective
- Help children realize that they may still feel scared or anxious, but:
 - The world is generally a safe place
 - Professionals are doing everything possible to help
- Encourage expression but do not push for it

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2) Answering Children's Questions

- Be brief and direct
- Children do best when they absorb information incrementally
 - When they want to know more, they will ask more
- Be truthful and clear; use simple language
 - Distortion of facts can lead to a sense of betrayal later
 - Children will fill in the gaps themselves when information is ambiguous
- A child's inquisitiveness can be the most useful guide in determining *how much* and *when* to share

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3) Psychoeducation: General Tips for Parents on What to Expect

- Regression
 - Neediness or separation anxiety
 - Acting-out behavior
 - Sleep Disturbance
 - Reactions are typically common and temporary
 - Healing will NOT be linear
 - Healing will be on very different timelines for different kids
 - Encourage patience and extra attention, while recognizing the added strain
- Watch for:
- Changes that get worse
 - Play that is rigid and repetitive
 - Extreme behaviors:
 - Threatening harm to self or others
 - Extremely irrational thoughts or beliefs
 - Significant cognitive impairment
 - Enacting ritualistic behaviors
 - Dissociating

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Resources

UNICEF USA

Kid Power Videos

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c4HbdEu8g-g> (Name it to tame it)

<https://www.unicefkidpower.org/extracredit/> (We're all in this together)

Kid's Books

Holmes, M. M. 2000. *A Terrible Thing Happened*. Washington, DC: Magination Press.

Sheppard, C. 1998. *Brave Bart: A story for traumatized and grieving children*. Grosse Pointe Woods, MI: The National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children.

Other

Headspace: <https://www.headspace.com/meditation/kids>

National Child Traumatic Stress Network: <https://www.nctsn.org/>

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Questions? Comments?



Contact:
Institute for Disaster Mental Health
at SUNY New Paltz

www.newpaltz.edu/idmh
idmh@newpaltz.edu

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