

NOTES FROM SESSION ONE:

How Children Respond to Trauma

Children who have been through trauma may show a range of symptoms that are called “traumatic stress reactions.” These reactions are grouped into three categories.

Hyperarousal means that the child is jumpy, nervous or quick to startle. After an acute traumatic event, such as a car accident or natural disaster, many of us have had this experience.

Re-experiencing means that images, sensations, or memories of the traumatic event keep coming uncontrollably into the child’s mind.

This is what people commonly call flashbacks. But re-experiencing may not be as dramatic as being thrust back into the scene-it may be subtler.

*For example, whenever the child tries to think about his mother, he keeps remembering the way her face looked the night she was passed out on the floor.

Avoidance and withdrawal mean that the child feels numb, frozen, shut down. Or separated from normal life, and may pull away from friends and activities, even those he or she used to enjoy. Sometimes children withdraw to avoid any reminders of the traumatic event.

What You Might See: Traumatic Stress Reactions

Trauma reminders are things, events, situations, places, sensations, and even people that a child connects with a traumatic event. They may evoke intense and disturbing feelings tied to the original trauma and can lead to behaviors that seem out of place, but may have been appropriate at the time of the original traumatic event. This isn’t a conscious process. The child may be unaware of the connections.

Traumatic stress reactions can lead to a range of troubling, confusing, and sometimes alarming behaviors and emotional responses in children.

*For example:

- They may have trouble learning. They may not be able to focus, concentrate, or take in new information.
- Children may have trouble going to sleep or staying asleep, or experience nightmares when they do sleep.
- They may feel moody, being tearful one minute and cheerful the next, or suddenly becoming angry or aggressive.
- They may not “act their age”-instead reacting like a much younger child.

Effect of Long Term Trauma

Trauma can have profound effects on a child's healthy physical and psychological development.

Children who have survived trauma often find it difficult to:

- Trust other people
- Feel safe
- Understand and manage their emotions
- Adjust and respond to life's changes
- Physically and emotionally adapt to stress
- Repeated traumatic experiences-particularly in very young children, and especially those at the hands of caregivers-can actually alter crucial pathways in the developing brain. Over time, a child who has felt overwhelmed over and over again may not react normally to even minor everyday stresses.

Jig Saw Children

Usually children are fairly consistent in their development and chronological age, but some children who have experienced trauma may be delayed in one or more areas, most often in the emotional or social areas. Some children may "regress" in development under a lot of stress, meaning that at one point they had reached a certain developmental stage, but then fell behind because of acute stress or trauma.

Areas of Development may not be consistent with the chronological age. Because an inconsistent environment or a traumatic environment interfered with development, children may be uneven in their development in almost a jigsaw kind of way. May be advanced or behind.

Social Development

Attention seeking behaviors or boundary issues

Emotional Detachment, Attachment Disorders

Problems in Peer Relationships

Could have learned manipulation skills

Emotional Impact

Parentified, Not used to being parented, Used to parenting the adult

May not trust adults. Doesn't feel safe

Guilt, shame and anger

Trouble Regulating Emotional Responses

Fearfulness; Physical response to stress,

Hyper-vigilance, Hyper-arousal, Very tuned into feelings

Depression and anxiety, Spacing out, Numbing, Withdrawal

Physical Development

Physical problems such as hearing or dental problems

Failure to Thrive, Lack of Basic Hygiene Skills

Eating, Sleeping and Bedwetting Problems

Physical Injury or Medically Related Conditions ,

Development and Language Delays

Cognitive Development

Mild to Severe Cognitive Impairments

Learning Issues, or Behind in School

Attention Difficulties or Impulse Control

May have missed some basic skills (colors, reading, etc) due to neglect

Recovering from Trauma: The Role of Resilience

Resilience is the ability to recover from traumatic events. In general, children who are resilient see themselves as Safe, Capable, and Lovable

Get Development Back on Track

The good news is that children and youth whose development has been derailed by trauma can learn new ways of thinking, relating, and responding emotionally. In fact, the cortex, the highest part of the brain-the part that is associated with reason and analysis-continues to develop throughout adolescence and into adulthood.

By providing new, positive experiences and examples, we can help traumatized children and adolescents to build new neural pathways to bypass old ones.

Rational thought and self-awareness can help young people override primitive brain responses.

The process of unlearning and rebuilding will take time-and patience-but we should always remember that there is hope and the potential for change.

Growing Resilience

Although nothing can entirely wipe out the effects of trauma, research has shown that there are many factors in a child's life that can promote resilience.

Children will be more likely to "bounce back" from trauma if they:

- Have a strong, supportive relationship with a competent and caring adult
- Feel a connection with a positive role model or mentor. This can be someone who has also gone through painful experiences and survived, or someone the child aspires to be like as an adult.
- Feel that their talents and abilities are being recognized and nurtured
- Feel some sense of control over their own lives. Being removed from one's home and placed in foster care can increase traumatized children's feelings of having no control, so having more say in what happens in their lives can help build resilience. Being empowered can help in their recovery from trauma.
- Feel invested in and part of a larger community, be it their neighborhood, faith-based group, scout troop, or extended family. Some school-aged children or adolescents who have experienced trauma find that volunteering or serving a cause can be healing.

As resource parents, we can play a big role in helping the children in our care develop resilience. Trauma informed parents seek to understand the effects and see behavior through a trauma informed lens. So instead of seeing behavior only as being bad and must be stopped, we see behavior through a trauma informed lens, not just what is wrong with you, but what has happened to you. We look beneath the behavior to helping children work on gaining resiliency and mastery in these areas.