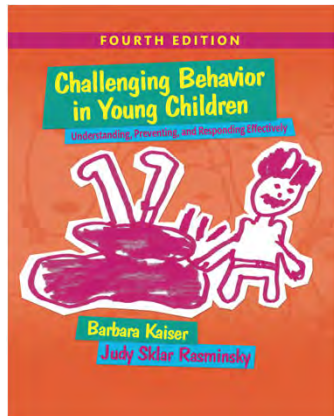


Understanding the Impact of Trauma on Behavior



Barbara Kaiser
barbarak@challengingbehavior.com

1

Trauma-informed practice

You need to know:

- Yourself
- What trauma is
- The effects of trauma on a child's brain development
- How trauma affects behavior and learning
- How to change your methods of responding to and interacting with children when they engage in disruptive, challenging behavior

**Creating a trauma-informed classroom
can benefit all children**



2

**Think about how you are feeling
whether or not you are closed due to
the coronavirus**

3

“Trauma results from an event or series of events that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and has lasting adverse effects on the individual’s physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.”

SAMHSA

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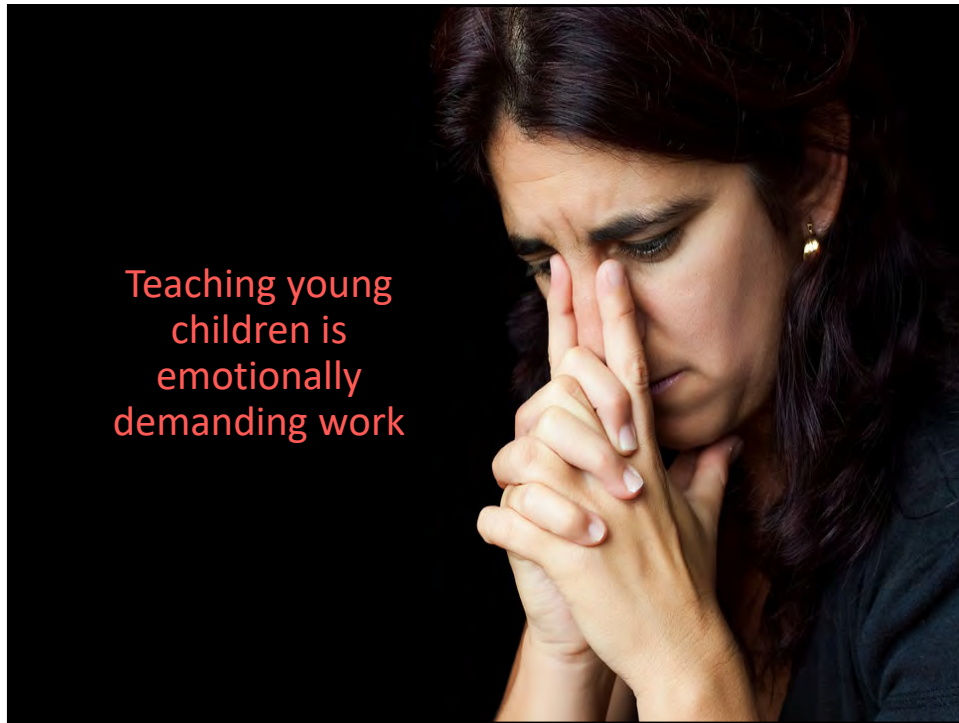
Recognizing your own stress level

- Be aware of triggers
- Some signs of stress
 - Feeling tired and wired at the same time
 - Being jumpy and hypervigilant
 - Feeling inexplicably irritable, angry, or numb
 - Being unable to focus or concentrate
 - Feeling anxious or unsafe
 - Feeling guilty about not doing enough
 - Being unable to sleep and having nightmares
 - Overeating or eating too little
 - Having physical ailments

5



6



Teaching young children is emotionally demanding work

7

Secondary trauma stress (STS)

- Being jumpy and hypervigilant
- Withdrawing from friends and family
- Feeling inexplicably irritable, angry, or numb
- Being unable to focus or concentrate
- Feeling anxious or unsafe
- Feeling helpless or isolated or guilty about not doing enough
- Losing self-confidence and feeling incompetent
- Being unable to sleep and having nightmares
- Overeating or eating too little
- Having physical ailments
- Either avoiding children who've experienced trauma or worrying continually about them, even when at home

8

- If you experienced trauma as a child or teenager you will probably be more vulnerable to STS
- It is not a sign of weakness or incompetence - “It is the cost of caring”
- It’s important to build your resilience

9

It starts with you

- Self-regulation is your most valuable asset
 - Prevents your negative emotions from triggering a child’s stress response and intensifying his/her challenging behavior
 - Helps the child learn to tolerate his/her own uneasy feelings and eventually to take charge of them him/herself

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If you have children at home

- Focus on washing hands properly
- Set up virtual playdates
- Spend extra time playing with your children
- Create a cozy, safe retreat
- Expect behavioral issues and respond gently
- Focus on safety and attachment
- Avoid social media and COVID conversation around children
- Go outside, run with them

(Sara Gilliam, Today's ExchangeEveryDay, and Eileen Feliciano)

11

What does being resilient mean?

- Resilience is about survival and growth
- Bouncing back from a terrible event
 - Having strength to cope
 - Being determined to see things through to the end
 - Being mentally strong
 - Maintaining a sense of well-being when facing adversity

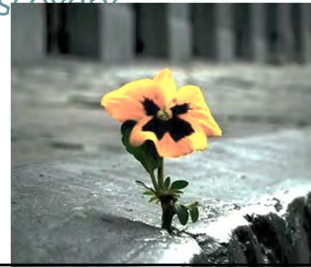


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Building your resilience

Build on your protective factors

- Make connections - find social support
- Self-esteem - nurture a positive view of yourself
- Avoid seeing crises as insurmountable problems
- Accept that change is a part of living
- Look for opportunities for self-discovery
- Set realistic goals
- Take decisive actions
- Maintain a hopeful outlook
- Take care of yourself



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Dealing with the here and now

- Stick to a routine
- Go for a walk
- Maintain social contact
- Understand those around you
- Limit social media/TV around COVID19
- Counter-balance the heavy information with the hopeful information
- Do something you never feel you have the time to do
- Reach out for help
- Help others
- Remind yourself daily that this is temporary

(Eileen Feliciano)

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Resilience in stressful circumstances

- You will be able to:
 - cope better with the emotional demands of stressful encounters
 - accurately perceive and appraise the emotions of others
 - help children express their feelings
 - encourage the building of trusting and cooperative relationships
 - effectively support children's ability to self-regulate

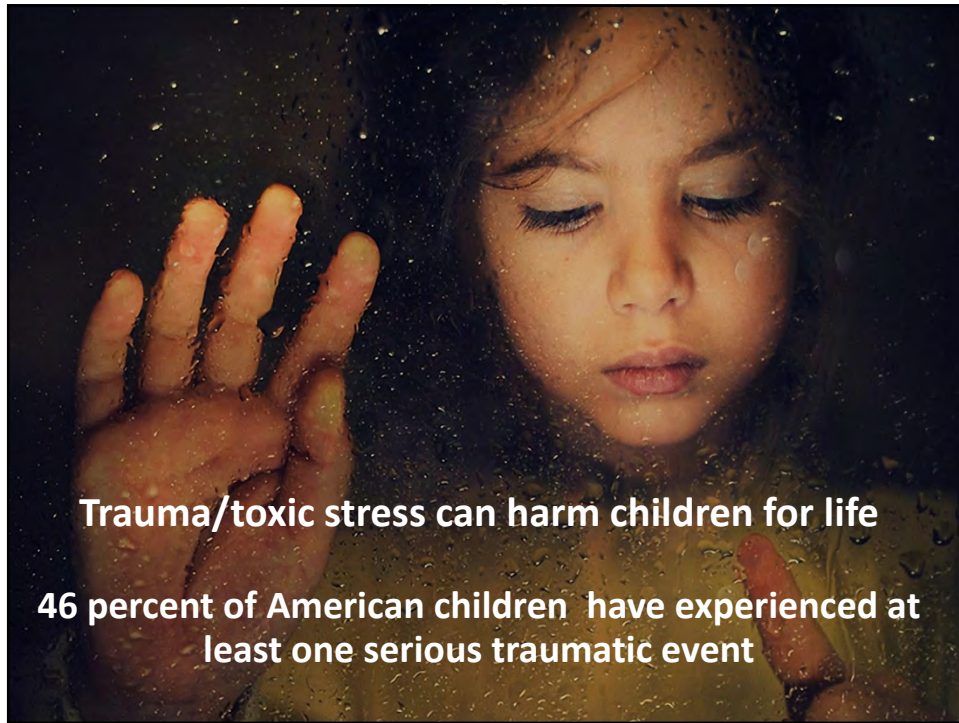
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Resilient adults... build resilient children



Devereux Center for Resilient Children

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Stress is not always detrimental

- *Positive stress* is mild or brief
 - A supportive adult can help the child learn to adapt and recover from the situation and gain a sense of mastery and control
- *Tolerable stress*—
 - Has the potential to harm
 - A supportive adult can buffer its effects and enable the child to cope

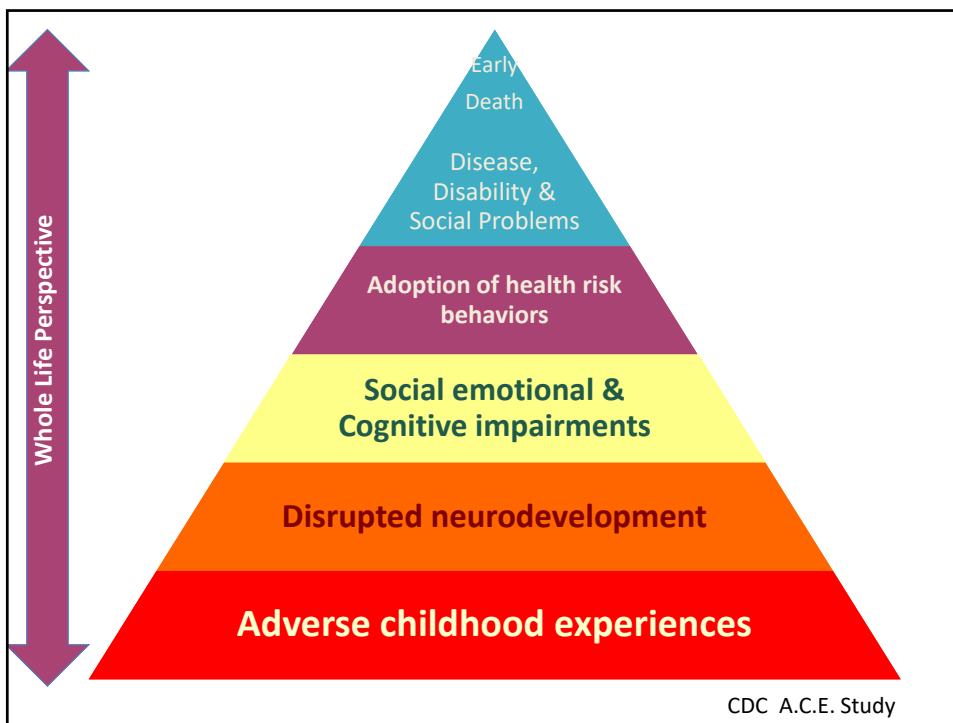
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- **BIOLOGICAL RISK FACTORS**
 - Genes
 - Temperament
 - Complications of pregnancy and birth
 - Substance abuse during pregnancy
 - Neurological delays
 - Emotional and behavioral disorders
 - Gender
- **ENVIRONMENTAL RISK FACTORS**
 - Family factors and parenting style
 - Poverty and the social conditions surrounding it
- **Trauma (ACES)**
 - Cultural dissonance
 - Peers

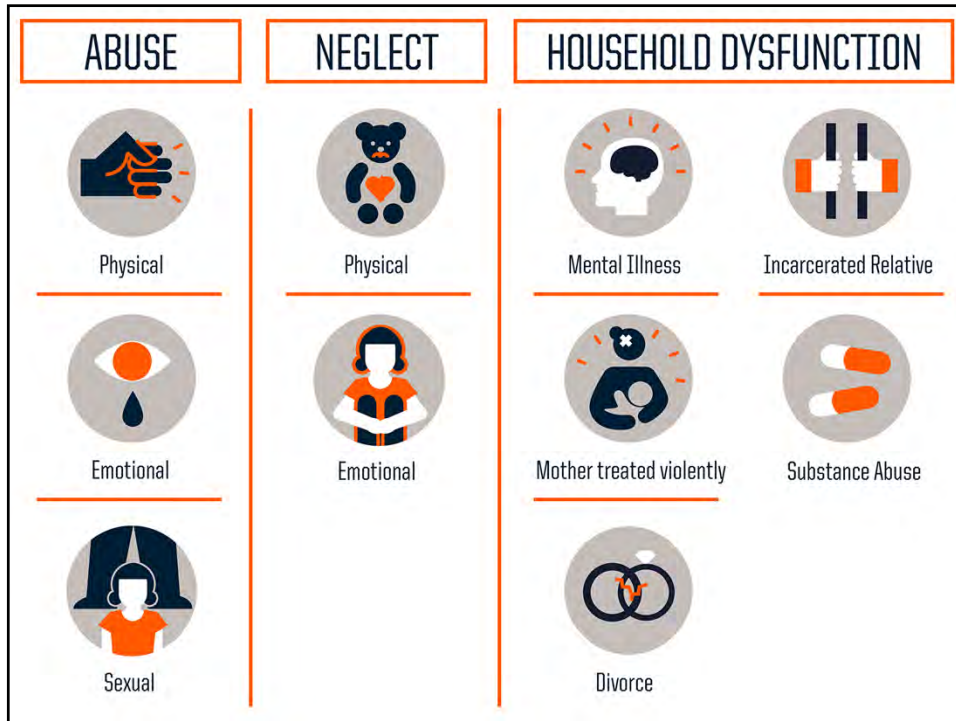


A silhouette illustration of a person walking a tightrope. The person is positioned on a narrow horizontal beam supported by two tall, thin towers. The person's arms are outstretched for balance. The towers are connected at the top by a horizontal bar.

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Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES)

- A traumatic event causes physical, emotional, or psychological distress or harm
- Alters brain architecture
- Delays development of Executive Functions
- <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2015/03/02/387007941/take-the-ace-quiz-and-learn-what-it-does-and-doesnt-mean>



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Trauma

It is an event that is perceived as a threat to one's safety or to the stability of one's world

- **Acute trauma**
 - Single exposure to an overwhelming event such as natural and human-caused disasters
- **Complex Trauma**
 - Occurs repeatedly and cumulatively, usually over a period of time and within specific relationships and contexts
- **Historical trauma**
 - Events that are so widespread as to affect an entire culture; such events also have effects intense enough to influence generations of the culture beyond those who experienced them directly

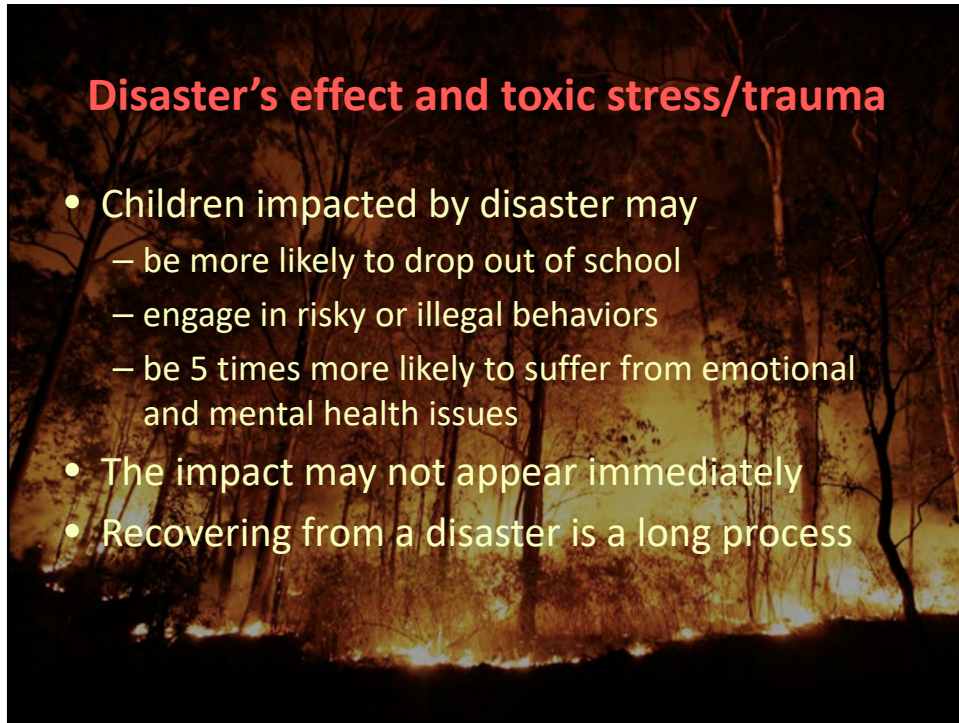
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Trauma and family violence

- Hearing or observing acts of violence against their mother, siblings, pets or extended family
- Being directly assaulted or threatened with violence or death to themselves or others
- Living in an atmosphere pervaded by overwhelming fear and stress, even if the violent parent is no longer present
- Having their possessions destroyed
- Being locked in or out
- Being forced to keep silent
- Observing injuries in the aftermath of assault and taking responsibility to call police ambulance or other sources of help

Trauma and young children – a caring approach project (2012)

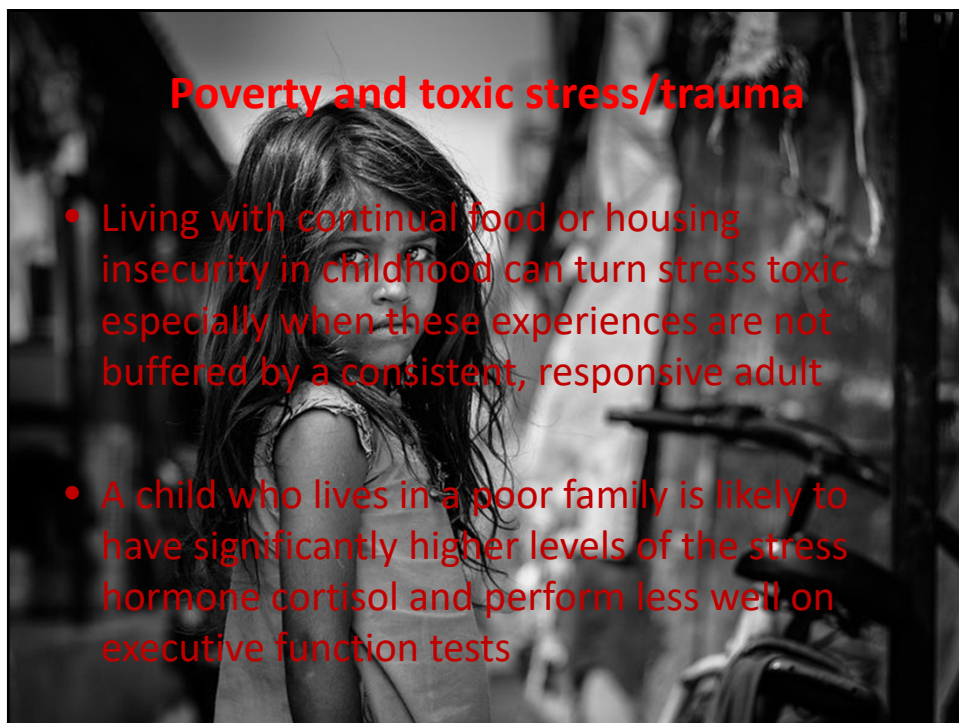
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Disaster's effect and toxic stress/trauma

- Children impacted by disaster may
 - be more likely to drop out of school
 - engage in risky or illegal behaviors
 - be 5 times more likely to suffer from emotional and mental health issues
- The impact may not appear immediately
- Recovering from a disaster is a long process

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Poverty and toxic stress/trauma

- Living with continual food or housing insecurity in childhood can turn stress toxic especially when these experiences are not buffered by a consistent, responsive adult
- A child who lives in a poor family is likely to have significantly higher levels of the stress hormone cortisol and perform less well on executive function tests

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Homelessness as trauma

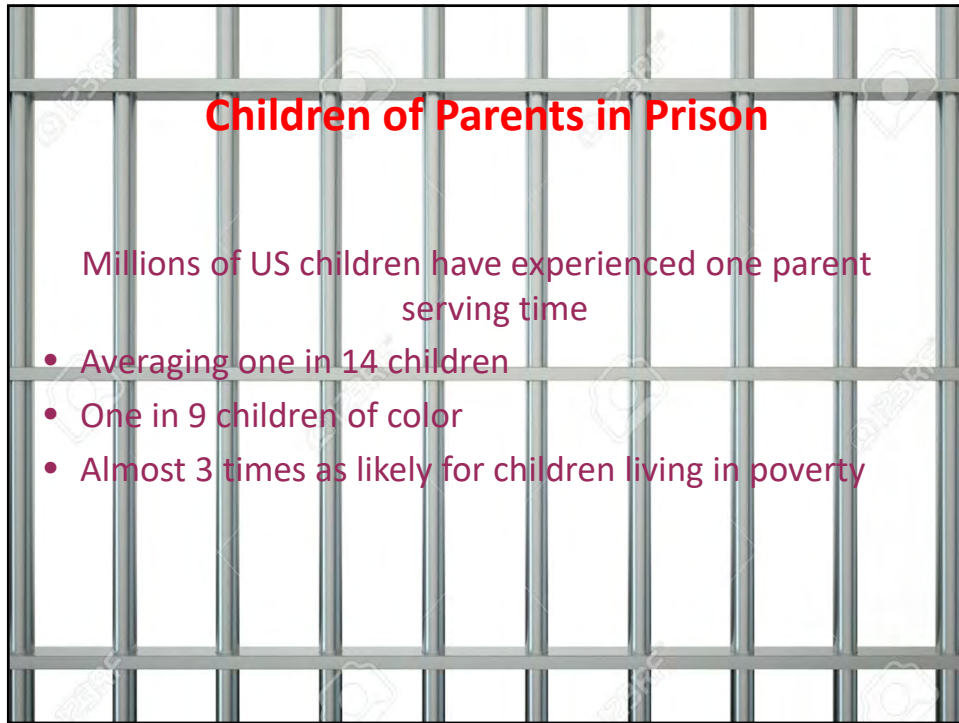
- A staggering **5 million** children and their families are now homeless in America
- This represents one in every 30 children



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Do you know if you have any children who have at least one family member in prison in your group?

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Children of Parents in Prison

Millions of US children have experienced one parent serving time

- Averaging one in 14 children
- One in 9 children of color
- Almost 3 times as likely for children living in poverty

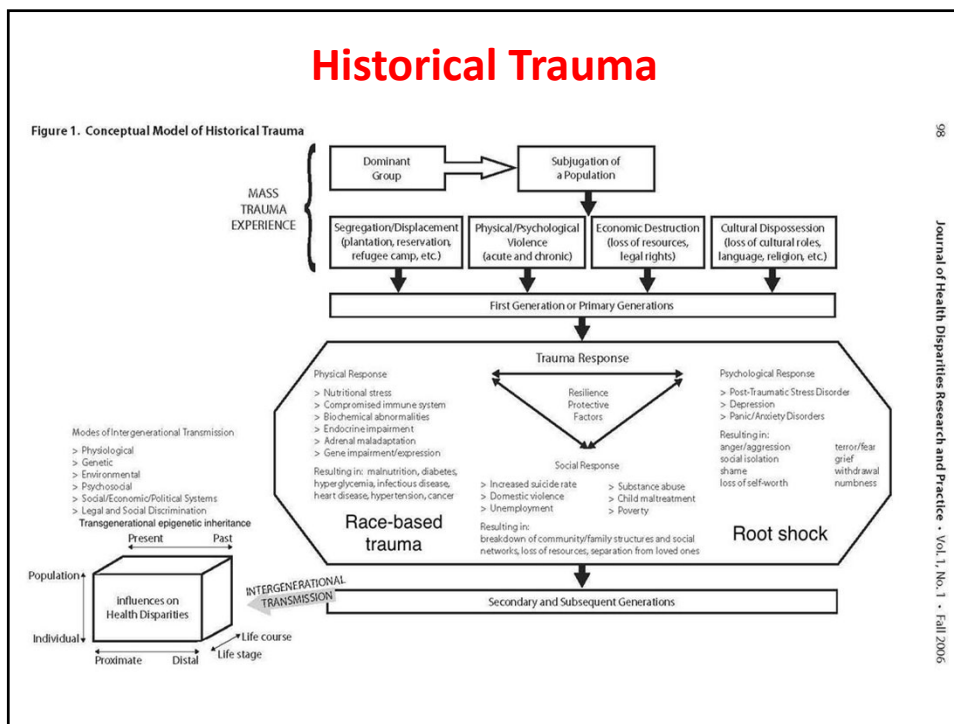
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Historical Trauma

“A constellation of characteristics associated with massive cumulative group trauma across generations.” (NAEYC Draft Position Paper, 2018)

- Colonization
- Genocide
- Slavery
- Sexual exploitation
- Forced relocation/incarceration based on race or ethnicity

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Mitigating psychological effects of school shooter drills

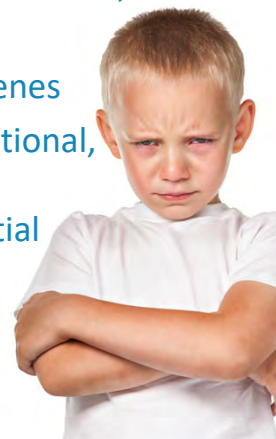
- Before drills occur, assure the children that it is a drill, discuss their concerns and provide an orientation
- Recognize that the experience can be traumatizing for any child and a trigger for students who have experienced trauma
- Allow for children who already have experienced trauma to be excused from participating or have very close support before, during and after the drills
- During the drills, emphasize that it is just practice and continuously state the purpose

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Early experience influences whether and how a child's genes are expressed

When toxic stress occurs early in a child's life, it sparks changes to the genes

- May activate or deactivate some genes
- Hinder the higher-level social, emotional, and cognitive competencies from developing their full genetic potential



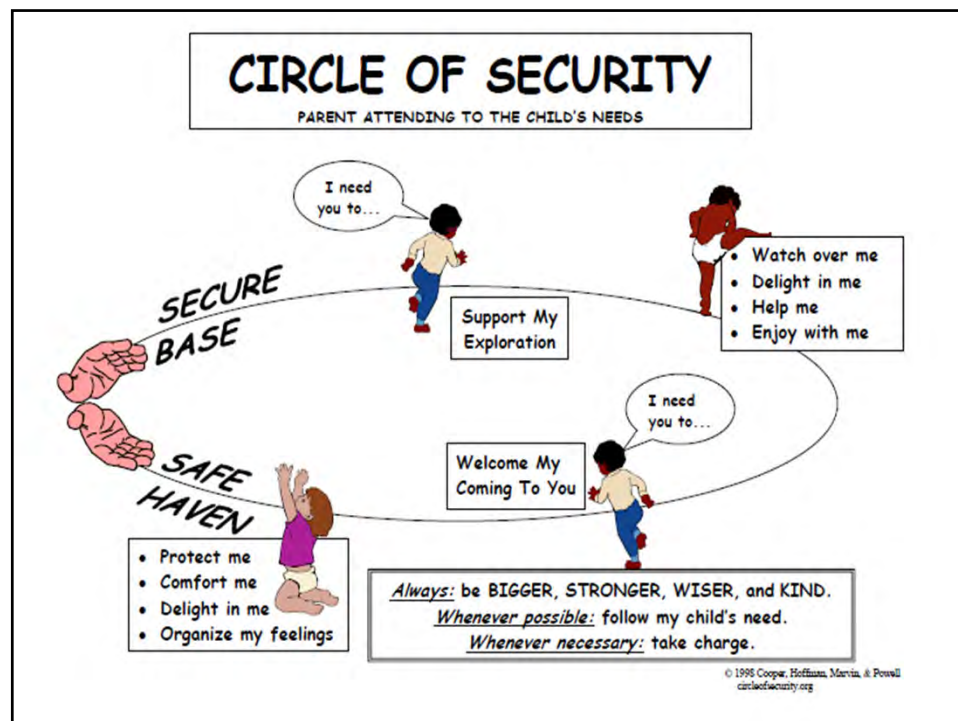
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The importance of attachment

The type of emotional support that a child receives during his/her first three-and-a-half years has an effect on education, social life and romantic relationships even 20 or 30



35



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A child's beliefs and feelings

<p>Secure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adults are trustworthy and reliable • Caregivers keep me safe and I can count on them when in need • Caregivers love me and I feel comfortable with new caregivers • Caregivers provide comfort when I am upset and help me feel better • Caregivers are sensitive, predictable and nurturing 	<p>Insecure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adults are inconsistent and untrustworthy • Caregivers fail to protect me, so I must rely on myself • Caregivers leave me, so I keep myself at a distance from new ones • Caregivers can't comfort me or help me regulate my feelings • Caregivers act in frightening and unpredictable ways
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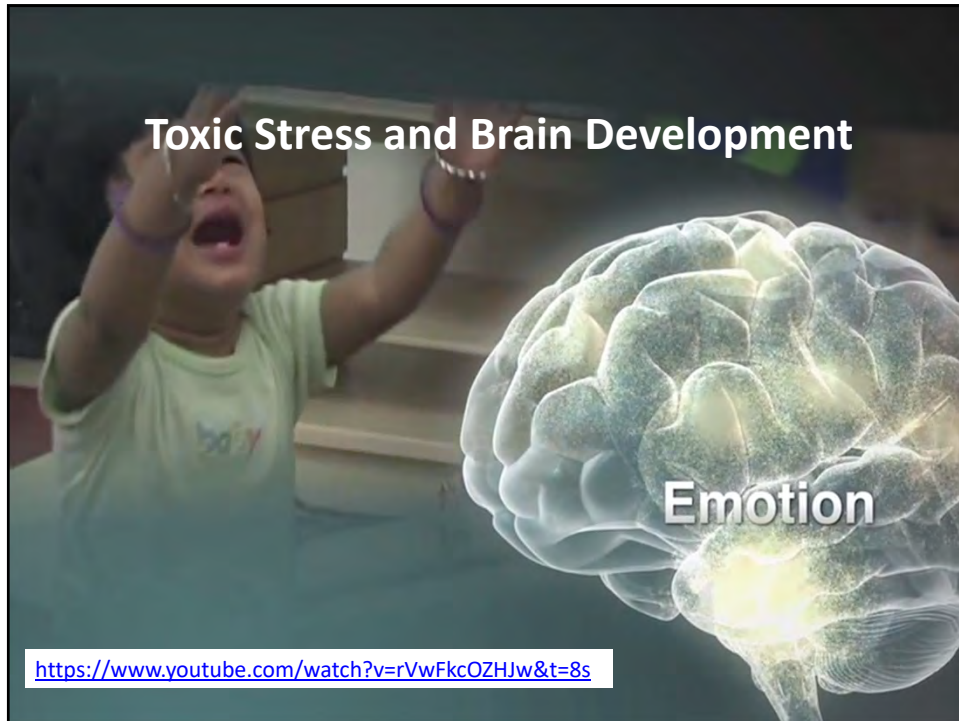
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Attachment Types and Characteristics

Attachment Type	Characteristics
Secure	Well adjusted, pleasant Responds well to appropriate authority Responds well to appropriate requests Accepts comfort when hurt or upset Confident, curious Has drive to master his/her world Willing to try new things Able to cope with challenges
Insecure Avoidant	Self sufficient beyond years Uncomfortable accepting help or comfort Appears fearless May seem withdrawn and lack of affect Unexpected meltdowns Blames others when things go wrong May lack empathy
Insecure Ambivalent	Demanding and clingy Difficult to soothe Low tolerance for frustration Manipulative uses temper tantrums and crying Fidgety, compulsive Poor concentration skills
Disorganized*	Lives in constant state of alarm Hyper vigilant Misinterprets social cues Highly reactive to sensory cues in the environment Displays bizarre or strange behavior Prone to meltdowns May vacillate between a hyper aroused state and a withdrawn state Unpredictable behavior

* Children with a Disorganized Attachment have experienced trauma Sorrels, B p. 61 (2017)

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The impact of toxic stress on brain development

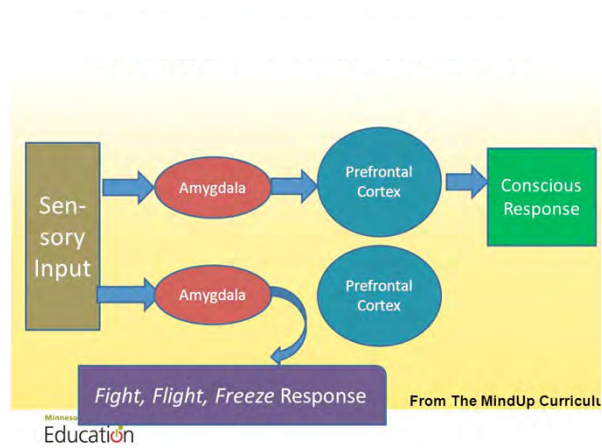
Toxic stress can harm children for life

- The adverse events that evoke the young child's stress response are intense, frequent, significant, and/or prolonged
- Increased level of hormone cortisol can cause lasting damage
- Difficulty processing emotion, self-regulation, memory and managing stress



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The brain knows exactly what to do in a dangerous situation



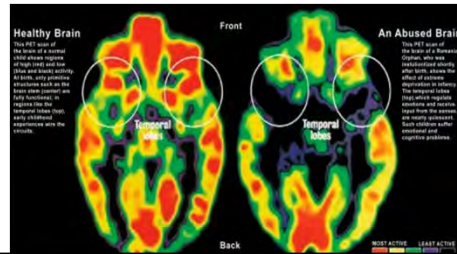
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Understanding a child's challenging behavior from a trauma-informed perspective

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Children who have experienced severe and chronic childhood trauma

- A sudden inability to develop along a “normal” trajectory for age
- Atrophied cognitive functioning
- Regressive behaviors
- Physical response/shock
- Disassociation
- Attachment disturbance



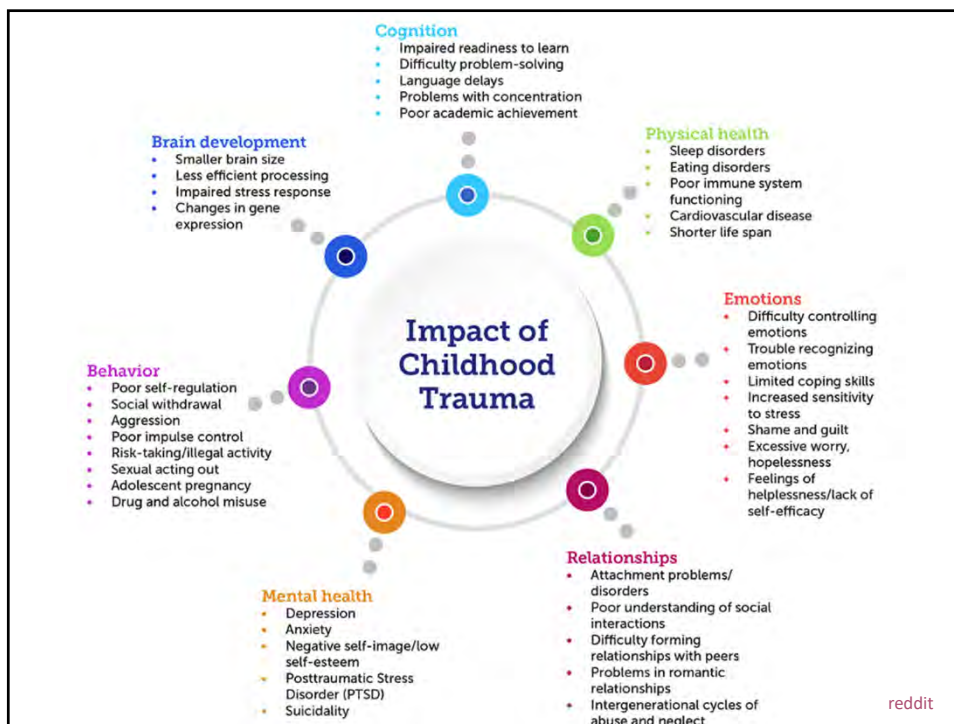
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Children who have experienced trauma/toxic stress:

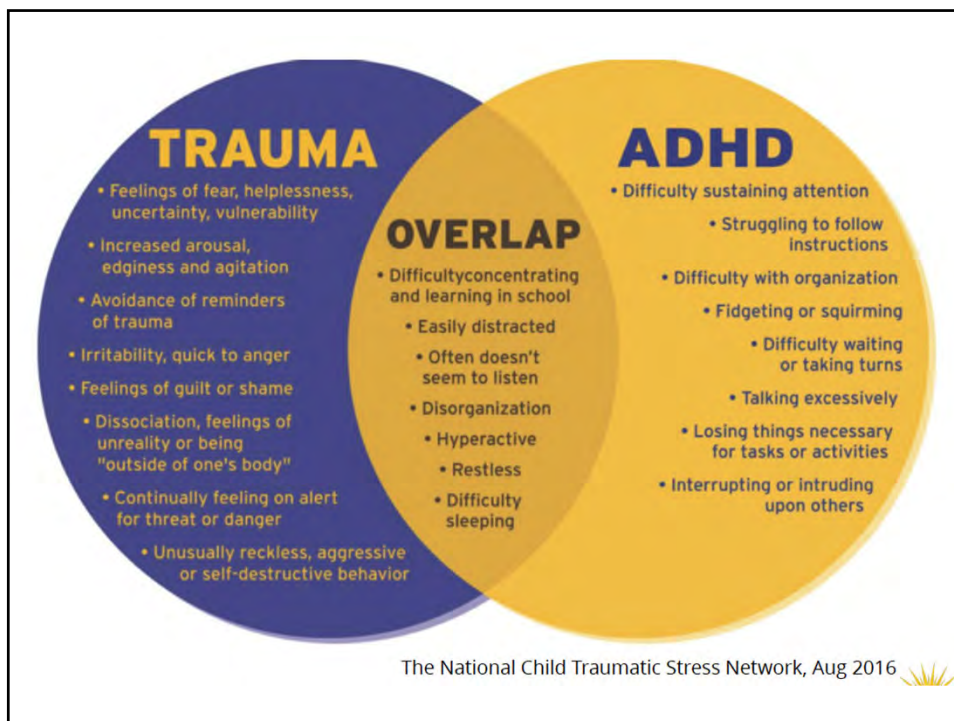
- **Increased level of hormone cortisol**
 - have difficulty learning unless they feel safe and supported
 - aren't trying to push your buttons
 - are in constant overdrive
- **You don't need to know exactly what caused the trauma to be able to help**

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2017

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The cumulative effects of trauma and behavior

- **Infants may:**
 - be difficult to soothe and comfort - resist being held
 - not be interested in playing
- **Toddlers may:**
 - have temper tantrums
 - have difficulty separating
 - be withdrawn or aggressive
 - refuse to be comforted
- **Preschoolers may:**
 - be hypervigilant and aggressive
 - preoccupied with perceived threats
 - be unable to concentrate on anything else
 - have trouble learning, paying attention, processing and retrieving information, and controlling impulses

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Trauma and social cognition/processing

Early childhood trauma affects a child's ability to:

- Recognize their own feelings
- Understand the feelings of others
- Identify social cues
- Accurately perceive the social environment

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Toxic stress and executive functions

Children with the abnormal cortisol patterns induced by toxic stress have impaired executive functions

- Are at high risk for aggressive and challenging behavior
- Have trouble sitting still, paying attention, concentrating, and following rules and directions
- Find it hard to:
 - control their impulses, emotions, and behavior
 - communicate their needs and desires in words
 - understand others' feelings
 - form satisfying relationships
- Tend to lash out at the sign of any threat, whether it's real or perceived

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“When children are oppositional, defensive, numbed out, or enraged, it's also important to recognize that such “bad behavior” may repeat action patterns that were established to survive serious threats even if they are intensely upsetting or off-putting.”



Bessel A. Van der Kolk 2014
The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma p.68

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Trauma-informed practice recognizes the impact of toxic stress and trauma, and strives to ensure that all children feel safe, supported, and connected

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A strength-based approach

Trauma isn't the only thing in the lives of children who've experienced it, and it doesn't define them!

Look for what interests them and what they do well, and incorporate these into the program



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DOs AND DON'Ts OF A TRAUMA-INFORMED COMPASSIONATE CLASSROOM

- 1 CREATE A SAFE SPACE**
Consider not only physical safety but the children's emotional safety as well.
- 2 ESTABLISH PREDICTABILITY**
Write out a schedule and prepare children for transitions. It helps create a sense of security and safety.
- 3 BUILD A SENSE OF TRUST**
Follow through with your promises and in situations where changes are unavoidable be transparent with your explanations.
- 4 OFFER CHOICES**
Empower students and offer "power with" rather than "power over" strategies.
- 5 STAY REGULATED**
Help your students (and yourself) stay in the "Resiliency Zone" to promote optimum learning. Have regulation tools ready to help students bumped out of the zone into either hyperarousal (angry, nervous, panicky) or hypoarousal (numb, depressed, fatigued).

There's really only one DON'T
Let's not punish kids for behaviors that are trauma symptoms.

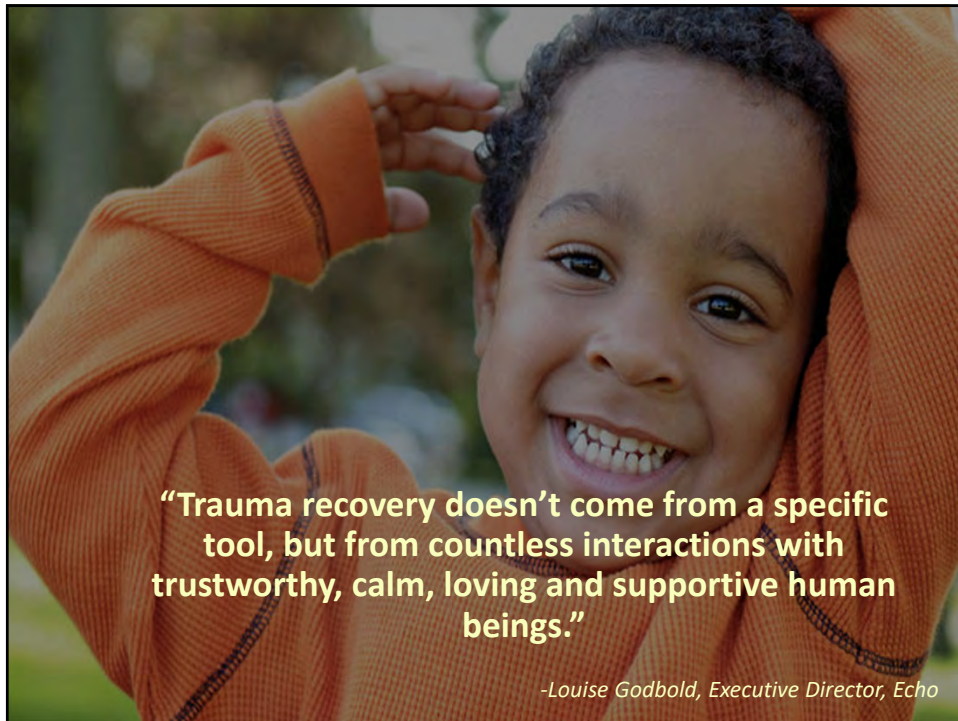
echo

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“Children who’ve been harmed in a relationship can only be healed in a relationship.”

Barbara Sorrels (2015)
Reaching & Teaching Children Exposed to Trauma

54



“Trauma recovery doesn’t come from a specific tool, but from countless interactions with trustworthy, calm, loving and supportive human beings.”

-Louise Godbold, Executive Director, Echo

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What can you do?

- Show that you care (unconditionally)
- Separate the child from the behavior
- Recognize and eliminate stress triggers
- Listen
- **Don’t take things personally**
- Focus on the positive
- Follow your instincts
- **Take care of yourself**

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Prevention is key

- Be consistent
- Provide routines
- Avoid surprises
- Create a caring classroom community
- Teach social skills proactively
- Make sure the environment is not over-stimulating
- Offer choices
- Dramatic, creative and free-play opportunities are important

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A paradigm shift

Hard as it may be:

- Respond to the child and his/her behavior with empathy and flexibility
- Instead of denying feelings, encourage the child to identify and tap into them
- Instead of asking yourself, “What’s wrong with this child?” start asking “What’s happened to this child?”

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Responding to Challenging Behavior From a Trauma Informed Perspective

- Reframe your response
 - Switch internal dialogue from “this kid is driving me nuts” to.... “How can I support him/her?”
 - Reinforce efforts to self-regulate
 - Respond CONSISTENTLY
 - Consequences should be:
 - connected to the problem or behavior
 - immediate, not drawn out
 - given with empathy, not in anger
- Trauma-affected children read consistency as “safety”

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The importance of non-verbal communication

- A gentle and positive tone of voice
- A calm facial expression
- A comfortable distance from the child
- A relaxed posture (arms at your sides, hands not on your hips!)

Always trying to understand what the child is feeling underneath his/her behavior



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Children who have experienced trauma need:

- Environments where they feel physically and psychologically safe
- Rich experiences that stimulate and enrich brain growth
- Supportive, safe, positive and stable relationships
- Support to develop emotional regulation skills
- Positive role models
- Resilient adults who are aware of their own personal stress and triggers

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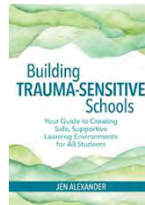
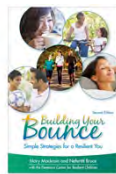
“Research on both the brain and behavior shows that nurturing and stable relationships with adults are essential for young children. This means that you may have an unparalleled opportunity to make a difference in children’s lives.”

Challenging Behavior in Young Children, 2016

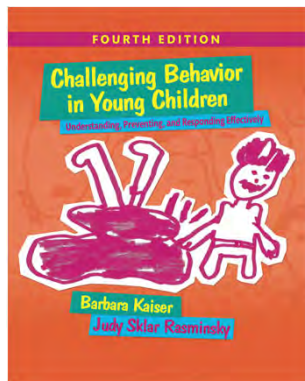
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Resources

- Devereux Center for Resilient Children
<https://centerforresilientchildren.org/>
- Access to ACE Quiz <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2015/03/02/387007941/take-the-ace-quiz-and-learn-what-it-does-and-doesnt-mean>
- Center on the Developing Child Harvard University <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/>



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**THANK YOU
And
STAY SAFE**

***Challenging Behavior in Young Children:
Understanding, Preventing, and Responding Effectively***

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