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ACEs in the Classroom: 
Addressing Early Trauma in an Early Childcare Setting

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Disclosures

- Alison D. Peak LCSW (Allied Behavioral Health Solutions, Nashville, TN) received her Master’s in Social Work from the University of Michigan with an emphasis in Interpersonal Practice with Children and Youth and Infant Mental Health. Alison is the Co-chair of the AIMHiTN Endorsement Committee and a member of AIMHiTN’s Leadership Cohort. Alison also has two post-graduate degrees, Integrated Behavioral Health in Primary Care and Pediatric Integrated Health Services. Alison is passionate about working with children with histories of early trauma, families with adopted children, and youth in DCS custody. Alison seeks to meet these children and families where they most often present for assistance, their physician’s office, and to assist in collaborating with primary care providers to optimize services for children and families.
Learning Outcomes

1) Explain the role of ACEs in brain architecture.
2) Identify the potential behavioral reactions of children with early trauma histories.
3) Identify simple interventions in the classroom with children who have histories of early trauma.

ACEs

- ACEs refers to Adverse Childhood Experiences
- This reference and the associated data are a result of a study completed by Kaiser-Permanente in the 1990s
  - Began as a study to identify the high cost of healthcare
  - 100s of potential variables to later health outcomes were considered
  - A list of 10 factors were identified that raised the likelihood of long-term health difficulties if they occur before the age of 18
ACEs Health Impact

- Research found that individuals who experience ACEs are at increased health risk
  - 4 ACEs are considered to be a threshold for increased risk of negative health outcomes such as cardiovascular disease, COPD, depression, anxiety, obesity, high blood pressure, stroke, etc.
  - Individuals with more than 4 ACEs are at greater risk for difficulties in school, divorce, and to require behavioral health services
  - Individuals with 6 or more ACEs have a life expectancy 20 years shorter, on average, than individuals with fewer than 4 ACEs
  - Individuals with 10 ACEs statistically always presented as profoundly developmentally delayed
ACEs and the brain

- ACEs are directly linked to brain architecture
- When a young child is in a traumatic situation their brain reacts with
  - Fight
  - Flight
  - Freeze
- These survival reactions result in production of Cortisol
- Consistent high stress environments create chronic stress which results in considerable levels of cortisol production

Let's talk about the brain

Emotional Brain has 4 primary areas
- Frontal cortex
  - Controls impulse, analytical thinking, cause and effect
- Limbic System
  - Controls access to words and most memories
- Brain Stem
  - Controls heart rate, blood pressure, body temperature
- Amygdala
  - Controls fear reactions
Cortisol and the Brain

Cortisol acts as a safety valve for brain
- When cortisol is released it BATHES the brain to signal that threat is coming
- Cortisol systematically shuts down sections of the brain to reserve energy and fuel for the brain stem—the most essential to survival
- Thus stress results in decreased
  - Impulse Control
  - Access to words
  - Memory
  - Ability to problem solve
- This is a survival mechanism

Chronic Stress and Cortisol

- When young children are exposed to consistent threat and unpredictable environments they produce constant amounts of cortisol
- This cortisol does long term damage an individual’s ability to access their frontal lobe
- In young children early trauma manifests itself in behaviors
Specific trauma is often accompanied by a child replaying the events

Chronic stress and trauma result in much different presentations
- Hyperactivity
- Difficulty following directions
- Poor impulse control
- Meltdowns
- Mistrust of adults
- Need to be in control
- Food Insecurity

Often children who have experienced a lot of ACEs incur diagnosis

Diagnosis is helpful if it allows a family to access resources

However, many children receive diagnosis that are not accurate
- PTSD vs. ADHD vs. Autism vs. Learning difficulties
Shame and Guilt

- Guilt is what you feel when you make a mistake and feel bad
- Shame is what you feel if you think you are bad because you made a mistake
- Most children who live in chronic stress feel directly responsible for the things that happen in their lives

Vignettes

- Mia is a 4 year old Caucasian female who is currently in foster care. Mia was removed due to her parents prostitution, drug use, physical abuse, and neglect
  - Mia has considerable meltdowns at school
  - Mia becomes aggressive when she is “clipped down”
  - Mia repeatedly discusses what “color she is on” and apologizes for “not being good enough.”
  - Mia gets very overwhelmed when schedules change
David is a 3 year old African American male who currently resides with his grandmother due to his mother’s homelessness. David is often in trouble for:

- Not staying seated
- Eating with his hands
- Putting his hands on friends
- Talking constantly
- Jumping off of furniture

### Vignette

### Managing Trauma in the Classroom

- Recognizing behaviors
- Understanding the needs of the children served by your classroom
- Identifying the motivation of the behavior
  - Is it avoidance?
  - Attention seeking?
  - Sensory seeking, does it appear compulsive?
  - Is it relational?
Managing Trauma in the Classroom

- Universal Interventions: Changes that benefit everyone
  - Use caution around wording with children
    - Some phrases and statements can evoke shame
  - Implement structure and routine
    - Picture schedules
  - Use positive regard and affection to celebrate achievements
  - Implement activities that provide sensory input
    - Pushing
    - Pulling
    - Blowing
    - Jumping

- Specific Interventions: Some children need a little more
  - Create a secure-base
  - Develop and utilize a transitional object
  - Place pictures of safe caregivers in areas where child can access them
  - Create a quiet zone
  - Identify alternative activities to provide child when other activities are identified as overwhelming
Collaborating with Caregivers

- Caregivers get it
  - They may not use the same words or have the same understanding, but they get it
  - All parents want what, they perceive, is best for their child
- ACEs allows a place to start a conversation about the events that may have occurred in the life of the parent and the child
- Changes conversation from “what’s wrong with you” to “what happened to you.”

Resources

- Child-Parent Psychotherapy
- Infant Mental Health
  - [https://www.allianceaimh.org/](https://www.allianceaimh.org/)
- Childcare Consultation
  - [https://www.ecmhc.org/](https://www.ecmhc.org/)
References

- Perry, Bruce D (2006) The Boy Who was Raised as a Dog.
- Szalavitz, Maria (2010) Born for Love: Why Empathy is Essential and Endangered

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