CHILDREN AND TRAUMA

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"Trauma is the unique individual experience of an event or enduring conditions in which the individual's ability to integrate his/her emotional experience is overwhelmed and the individual experiences (either objectively or subjectively) a threat to his/her life, bodily integrity or that of a caregiver or family member" (Saakvitne, K. et al, 2000)
TYPES OF TRAUMATIC EVENTS

• Sexual abuse / assault
• Physical abuse / assault
• Emotional abuse
• Neglect
• Accident, illness or medical procedure
• Witness to abuse or assault
• Natural or manmade disasters
• Forced displacement
• Death/ separation
SYMPTOMS OF TRAUMA

• Change in sleeping habits
• Nightmares
• Change in eating habits
• Change in social habits
• Loss of interest in normal activities
• Development of new fears
• Increase in anxiety
• Increase in sadness
• Increase in anger/ irritability
• Decrease in ability to concentrate
WHEN WORKING WITH A CHILD WHO HAS EXPERIENCED TRAUMA

Many of the treatments used with children have not been empirically studied with that population; however, it is widely accepted that the quality of the therapeutic relationship is the foundation for treatment.

- Develop a safe area and a supportive, trusting relationship
- Draw on existing strengths of the child and child’s environment
- Identify child’s existing methods of coping and problem solving
- Identify what the child is able to control and not control
- Identify what is the actual traumatic event and what are secondary traumas
- Listen to the child—every child reacts to events in his/her own way
WHEN WORKING WITH A CHILD WHO HAS EXPERIENCED TRAUMA

- Practice open communication – it is ok for the child to feel scared or upset; avoid using the term “normal” as you don’t want the child looking for the “right” way to feel or act; **never** tell the child “this is a secret” or “our game”

- Do not be afraid to discuss the trauma: do not bring it up, but do not avoid discussing it if the child mentions it; tell the truth, even when difficult and if you don’t know the answer, tell the child that

- Monitor your own emotions; do not allow the child to see you over-reacting to the trauma; the child can base his/her emotions off of yours

- Monitor the physical space and boundaries; many children who have been abused associate intimacy with pain and fear and they will shy away from touch while others seek approval via touch and do not respect healthy boundaries
WHEN WORKING WITH A CHILD WHO HAS EXPERIENCED TRAUMA

• Establish and maintain routines and roles (do not let things slide because the child has had a difficult time); make sure the child understands the schedule for the day and if there are changes in the schedule, tell the child ahead of time, with an explanation as to why there are changes

• Specify rules and consequences; make sure that you are consistent

• If the child becomes upset during activities, stop the activity and discuss with child; feel free to re-structure activity in the future to avoid deliberately upsetting or re-traumatizing the child

• Give the child choices; this will help them re-gain a sense of control
ASSISTANCE WITH TRAUMA

Your assistance may not come at the right time for the child. Some children must deal with the results of trauma and/or secondary trauma prior to working on the emotional and mental impact of the initial traumatic event. While your intentions are honorable and your desire to help is sincere, the child may not be ready to accept help. In this case, let the child know that you are available to listen, you can be trusted, and when he/she is ready, you will help find the resources best suited for the situation.
USING WHAT YOU’VE LEARNED WHEN WORKING WITH COLLEGE STUDENTS

• Connect your relationship with the student to concrete resources on campus; your relationship with the student will grow and strengthen as the student sees you are able to assist

• Do not make decisions for the student; give them all options and allow them to make the choice; they need to feel in control of their education and their lives

• Role model what it means to be accountable and responsible for your actions. Admit your mistakes.
USING WHAT YOU’VE LEARNED WHEN WORKING WITH COLLEGE STUDENTS

• Make sure students are aware of the deadlines for the semester and consequences for missing those deadlines.
• Discuss with students that professors may change syllabus at any given time; work with the student to develop a plan of action if changes occur. Even a small change, like pushing back deadlines or changing the scope of an assignment, can have an emotional response from the student.
• Remind student of campus and community resources. I-CARE has a fairly comprehensive list on their webpage.
• Be honest with the students. If you don’t know the answer, tell the student that and let them know that you will try to obtain the answer.
USING WHAT YOU’VE LEARNED WHEN WORKING WITH COLLEGE STUDENTS

• Follow through on your statements to the student. If you tell the student that you will contact them in “x” amount of time, contact them in “x” amount of time.

• Be aware of your boundaries. Do what you can to help the student build the skills needed to access resources but be careful about doing everything for the student.

• **NEVER** initiate physical contact with the students. If they hold out a hand for a handshake, yes, shake their hand. If they move to hug you, angle your body for a side/one-armed “hug” leaving plenty of space between your body and theirs.
Studies show that children in foster care are 2 X more likely to meet PTSD criteria than war veterans.

“safe space” is seen as a myth by those in foster care; only the rich have safe spaces.

Remind the students of their strengths. Approximately 85% of students in foster care state they want to go to college; only 20% of them actually make it to a college campus. Of that 20% only 2 - 3% actually get a degree. The student has survived and made it to college. It takes incredible strength and skill to do so. They can succeed here.

NEVER, NEVER, NEVER ask them why they were in foster care.
TRAUMA AND YOU

Take time to take care of yourself. Working with children who have been through a traumatic event can also affect you. Pay attention to your own emotional reactions. If you find yourself becoming more emotional, more irritable, numb, distant, angry, etc., find ways that you can release your emotions in a healthy way. Set boundaries between your work and personal life and engage in activities to care for yourself. Peer consultation and therapy can also assist with trauma related stress.