Stress and Trauma: Options for Support in Early Childhood

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Stress (DEFINED) ..... 

- Physiological and psychological reaction to excessive stimulation
  - real or perceived

- Sources
  - Physical: noise; crowding; extremes in temperature; injury; illness; social disorganization
  - Psychological: [threat to well-being (safety/security)] loss; emotional overload; threatening/disorganized behavior; fear
Chronic Stress

- The experience of multiple and prolonged, developmentally negative events; most often occur within a child’s care-giving system
  - High levels of unpredictability
  - Persistent and multi-sensory
  - Chronic stress has more long-term, cumulative impact on children
    - in most significant form identified as trauma
- Short and long term (permanent) physical damage
  - Brain structural and functional changes
  - Physiological reaction patterns
  - Long term adult health implications
Stress effects (cortisol production) force the areas of the brain focus on survival and adaptation:

- Cerebral cortex (prefrontal and frontal lobes) function reduced with resulting problems with:
  - Problems with verbal skills, memory, and problem solving
  - Underdeveloped corpus collosum – structure that allows for communication between the Left and Right hemispheres
  - Problems in adaptive flexibility and emotional regulation
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceived Threat Level</th>
<th>Low</th>
<th></th>
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<th>High</th>
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<tr>
<td>Adaptive Response</td>
<td>Receptive-Ready to learn</td>
<td>Vigilance</td>
<td>Freeze-Withdrawal</td>
<td>Flight-Fight</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regulating Brain Region</td>
<td>Cortex</td>
<td>Cortex-Limbic</td>
<td>Limbic-Midbrain</td>
<td>Midbrain-Brain Stem</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cognition</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>Concrete</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Reactive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical State</td>
<td>Calm-Engaged</td>
<td>Arousal-Attention</td>
<td>Alarm</td>
<td>Fear</td>
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**Threat-Arousal System Response Continuum**

adapted from B. Perry
Coping Strategies

Physiological Response

Stimuli (Stressor)

Internalized
Externalized Behaviors
Physical and psychological options to reduce impact of stressor

- Not always socially desirable or effective
- Not always known to the child
  - Sleep/eating disturbances; anxiety/fear
- Easily habituated behaviors
- May be both intentional and reflexive/reactive
- Highly resistant to change without assistance
- Become additive and cumulative over time

More constructive coping options require cognitive flexibility and physical stability
The effects of negative (especially chronic) stress/trauma places children at significant risk – for management of behavior and acquisition of learning skills.

Children cannot “de-stress” themselves, they need adult assistance in learning how to manage the effects of stress AND acquire more effective coping strategies.
Research outcomes indicate…..

Interventions that

- consider a range of connected strategies
- that focus on key elements of resilience, and
- recognize the principles of “trauma-informed care”

can off-set stress effects
• Disposition – capacity to manage stimuli
• Working intelligence
• Identification of unique ability

**Resilience**

- Resistance to sensory overload
- Capacity to use strategies to strengthen appropriate

**Protective Factors**

- External features
- On-going, caring relationship
- Group affiliation
- Acquisition of social competence skills
Trauma-informed care

Trauma informed practices take into consideration:

1. how the mind and body respond to stress/traumatic events – the **interrelationship between trauma coping behaviors and outcomes** (especially maladaptive ones (e.g., anxiety, depression, substance abuse, OCD, aggression))

2. recognition that symptoms are in reality, adaptive coping strategies rather than pathology

3. understanding on how cultural context influences perception and response to traumatic events with priority given to interventions respectful of and specific to cultural backgrounds

Steele & Malchiodi (2012)
The ARC Model is an implementation, clinically-based framework for developing intervention strategies with children and youth.

Flexible approach intended to focus on three core elements of trauma impact:

- **Attachment** – attunement, consistent response, routines and rituals
- **Self-regulation** – identifying, modifying, and supporting expression of feelings and emotions
- **Competency** – achieving developmental tasks, executive functions, self-identify

Blaustien (2010)
Implications for Intervention

- Impacts of (chronic) stress can be softened, changed, and new skills developed
- Strategies should support protective factors and strengthen resilience
- Intentional intervention requires design and implementation of multiple strategies
  - Building connection and affiliation
  - Reducing physiological effects
  - Developing greater self-efficacy (sufficiency)
Addressing Stress Impact

- Resilience and stress management
- Self competence
- Response regulation
- Sensory Overload
- Skill Deficit
- Environmental Disorganization
- Classroom community
Classroom Community
**Goal:** Provide multiple options for children to be connected to the classroom as a *community of support, engagement-contribution, and identity* (physical and social)
- Reduce the perception and feelings of isolation, “different from”, and insecurity about how to belong

**Strategies:**
- Attention to consistency in the routines for arrival, dismissal, transitions, caring for personal needs, special occasions
- Essential planning for managing self-care routines
- Consistent use of print style, location of print information, colors
- Outside visitors; use images of adults/other children in constructive and diverse settings and behaviors
- Classroom identity – “blue room,” mascot/logo, use of words members, group, community (not family), song/chant; must be respectful!
Supporting Classroom Community

- **Space design**
  - Priority for private and observation areas; use of natural materials, display of adult & child creations/arrangements

- **Consideration of sensory input –**
  - **Smell and taste**
    - Smell triggers – perfume, cigarette smoke; food preparation; need to identify smell and characteristics; use of essential oils
    - Use of food events for positive social interactions; identification of tastes
  - **Visual**
    - Variations in visual input – lighting; organization and labeling of materials, areas
  - **Sound**
    - Sound reduction and cues for specific behaviors; skills in sound identification
  - **Kinesthetic (tactile)**
    - Connection with natural materials, traffic patterns, sensory play, use of fidget toys, music and movement in a variety of offerings, including soothing sounds
Regulating Responses
- **Goal:**
  - Decrease the impact of stress-induced responses – anxiety; restlessness; heightened reactions; hyper-vigilance; aggression
  - Increase foundational skills for cognitively-linked self-regulation skills

- **Strategies:**
  - **Self-regulation** (regulation is dependent on external environment)
    - Self-management of strong emotional responses
    - General classroom management priorities
  - **Relaxation** opportunities and techniques
    - Climate and personal options
    - Breathing and mindfulness
Regulating Responses

- Classroom Management
- Supporting physical interactions ~ “aggression nurturance” and intellectual development
  - Start circle/group times with physical activity
  - Tolerate bumping, prodding, pushing if minor
  - Need to have physical breaks at every 30 minutes
  - Integrate movement with “learning content” (fidget toys)
- Blending physical actions with feelings and management
  - Sad to happy: sit up tall; 2 breaths; Mona Lisa smile
  - Angry to calm: stop dragon brain (standing); 2 breaths; blow dragon away
  - Scared to safe: whisper to self what is scary; 2 breaths; self hug
Self Competence
Goal:
- Expand the range (collection) of skills children can readily use across a variety of settings
- Have children “know” they have skills as well as value

Strategies:
- Strengthening core social skills
- Distinguishing emotional cues (emotional intelligence)
- Identifying personal preferences and accomplishments (self-efficacy)
- Developing understanding of context(s) – social stories & bibliotherapy
Goal: Help children identify and learn appropriate, self-supportive ways of responding to situations

May have learned maladaptive coping responses in social situations (i.e. bullying their way through a social encounter with other children)

Strategies:

- Provide an environment conducive to skill building and reward positive social interaction whenever possible
- Target the “Big 4” as core personal-social skills/behaviors
  - Taking turns
  - Observing others
  - Listening to others
  - Following the directions of others
Reducing stress effects in young children can result in positive long-term positive outcomes –
  - waiting for “maturity” will not result in more easily obtained results

What stressed children need is mature adult guidance, patience, understanding and wisdom….stress responses are not personal

Focus on the three “p’s” of working with stressed children
  - Persistence
  - Patience
  - Perspective
References/Resources

WEB - REFERENCES-RESOURCES

- www.aaets.org - American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress
- www.acestudy.org – ACE study description and related research
- www.casel.org - CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning)
- www.csefel.vanderbilt.edu - Center for Social Emotional Foundations for Learning
- www.www.mindfulschools.org (Mindful practice in classrooms)
- www.nctsnet.org – Child Traumatic Stress Network
- www.developingchild.harvard.edu – Center of the Developing Child (resources and research analysis papers)
- www.devereux.org – Devereux Center for Resilient Children
- www.nctic.org – National Center for Trauma Informed Care
- www.childtrauma.org – Child Trauma Academy