Understanding Trauma, Grief, and Loss in Early Childhood (Ages 0-5)

Facilitated By:
Nicci Kirlew, MSW, LMSW
Southwest Human Development
April 23, 2015

Getting Started…

- Introductions: Please introduce yourself and share with us what role(s) you play in a child's life? Are you a teacher, parent, grandparent, case manager, director of child care, therapist, etc.

- Also, a quick note… Sometime when discussing trauma, grief and loss, we can react with feelings of anger, sadness or even be triggered to remember our own past experiences. This is normal and if you need to take a minute, please do.

Training Objectives

- We will learn what are some possible reasons for trauma in young children
- We will learn how young children may show signs of trauma, grief, or loss
- We will learn how young children may understand trauma differently due to their developmental stage
- We will learn how to assist young children that may have experienced trauma, grief, or loss

Military Families

- 90,000 babies are born to active duty service members each year and there are over 441,000 children ages 0-3 in military families
- One study showed that these children had more than 20 stressful events in their first 4 years of life
- About 700,000 children in the US have at least one parent serving away from home
- In the last 8 years, more than 12,000 children in military families have experienced death of a parent

Why talk about this?

- Some of the children we work with have experienced trauma, grief, and loss.
- It is important to understand developmentally how a child may experience trauma, grief, and loss differently than an adult.
- Children need help to recover and feel safe while in our care.
- Trauma, grief, and loss may affect the way children behave and interact in our classrooms.
- Caregivers, teachers, parents, and adults can make a difference!!!

What is Grief and Loss?

- Grief is a natural and multi-faceted response to loss. It is the emotional suffering one feels when something or someone the individual loves is taken away. The grief associated with death is familiar to most people, *but individuals can grieve around other situations or circumstance*.
  - Ex: parent or caregiver had to leave for a deployment, parent's physical or mental ability changed, family relocate/moving etc, changing classrooms at preschool.

- Grief/Loss can be experienced: physically, cognitively, behaviorally, socially, mentally etc.

- Grief and Loss can be traumatic, especially for a young child

Grief in Young Children

- There is **no right or wrong way to grieve, no "appropriate" length of time to experience grief.**

- Children's reactions to grief depend upon the child's age, developmental level, previous life experiences, emotional health before the incident, and family and social environment.

- What do you think are some ways children would show us/tell us that they are grieving?

From: http://www.nctsnet.org/trauma-types/traumatic- grief/typical-grieving-process

What is Trauma?

Trauma: a single event, a series of connected traumatic events, or a condition of chronic, enduring stress that is perceived as life-threatening or so overwhelming that it exceeds ones ability to cope with it.

Trauma in Young Children

- For young children, trauma includes **directly experiencing or witnessing** an event(s) that involve **actual or threatened death or serious injury** to the **child or others,** or a **threat to the psychological or physical integrity** of the **child or others**

Perception of Trauma

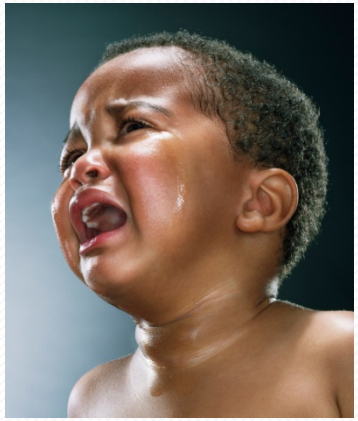
- The idea of perception of threat to life or physical integrity is tricky in young children because of:
  - (1) their limited verbal skills
  - (2) their developmental capacity to accurately/ reasonably assess events as life threatening (i.e. may perceive some things as life threatening when they are not and some things as not life threatening when, in fact they are)
  - **What could be a perceived threat to children in military families that as an adult we do not perceive as a threat?**

Can you think of any types of trauma a child could experience?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Possible indicators of trauma in young children

- Crying
- Not showing much emotion
- Startling easily
- Tantrums; anger outbursts, frustration
- Thumb-sucking
- Development of new fears



Understanding Trauma in Young Children

- To understand a child's symptoms, we must understand:
  - what traumatic events happened/their experiences
  - the child's personality traits/ characteristics
  - the child's developmental level

How to Help Young Children

- When children are struggling with overwhelming feelings/memories or when they act out with challenging behaviors, what are some ways we can help?

You can make a difference…

- First and foremost recognize that if a child has even one person with whom he or she feels safe, the child may benefit for a lifetime.
- Lots of eye contact-checking in with them even while across the room
- Loving expressions
- Give the child choices (helping them to feel a sense of control)
- Comfort child when distressed
- Engage in meaningful conversations with them when able
- Soothing talk, saying everything is okay, you are safe with me
- Smells of things that bring comfort (mom's shirt)
- Transitional objects from home (pictures, stuffed animals)
- Anything that reduces stimulation to that particular child.

- Now, we are going to talk about a specific way to help children when they are struggling…

Conscious Discipline® Brain Model

www.consciousdiscipline.com

Brain Model

- **Brainstem** -- survival; alarm system; fight/flight
  - *We need to offer **SAFETY***
- **Limbic System**– emotional center
  - *We need to offer **CONNECTION***
- **Prefrontal Lobes of the Cortex –** CEO; reasoning;
  - *We need to offer **PROBLEM SOLVING***

More Ways to Help: Emotional Literacy

- **Your body looks like this… (adult mirrors the child's physical posture)**
- **Your hands are… Your feet are…**
- **You seem_____(label emotion)**
- **I am here to help you feel better.**
- **You/We can _____ or _____.**

More ways to help

- Help child to label feelings
- Don't be afraid to let them talk about what is going on
- Free play/dramatic play
- Safe place

You can make a difference…

- If you are calm you are able to offer a calm presence and help your child calm down and help them problem solve.
- Be patient with the child and yourself—this is hard work!
- Being present, available, open, dependable, predictable and nurturing can really help the child.

A Gift to the World

You are heart.
You are hands.
You are the voice of kindness.
And who you are,
and all you do
Is a gift to the world

Adults need support too…

- Working with children and/or parenting can be really hard at times and it is normal to feel tired or frustrated.
- You can:
  - Talk to your peers
  - Call the Birth to Five Helpline 877-705-KIDS
  - Veteran's Crisis Line 800-273-8255, press 1
  - 800-959-TAPS www.taps.org
  - 800-342-9647 www.militaryonesource.com (counselors 24/7)
  - National Military Family Assoc www.nmfa.org

Questions?/Comments…

If you would like more information, or need help with a particular child or situation, please call us at the Birth to Five Helpline. We are here to help!

Birth to Five Helpline

1-877-705-5437

southwest human development

Creating a Positive Future for Young Children

Sources

- Conscious Discipline, Becky Bailey
- CSEFEL www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel
- Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and recovery. New* York: Basic Books.
- Terr, L. (1992) Too Scared To Cry: Psychic Trauma In Childhood.
- Van der Kolk, B.A. (1994). The body keeps the score: Memory and the evolving psychobiology of post traumatic stress. *Harvard Review of Psychiatry, 1(5), 253-265.*
- Van der Kolk, B., (Ed.) (1996) Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society. Guilford Press.
- Levine, P. (1997). Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma: The Innate Capacity to Transform Overwhelming Experiences.
- Rothschild, B. (2000). The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment.
- *From ZERO to THREE, Diagnostic Classification of Mental Health and Developmental Disorders of Infancy and Early Childhood. Revised Edition (DC-0-3R), 2005 p 15*
- Dan Seigel
- When Families Grieve," Sesame Street Workshop. *Last accessed March 6, 2014.*
- Zero to Three Volume 27, No 6, July 2007