



Ottawa **Child**
& **Youth** Initiative
Growing Up Great



Initiative pour les
enfants et les jeunes
Mieux grandir



OTTAWA INFANT AND EARLY CHILDHOOD
MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

INITIATIVE DE LA SANTÉ MENTALE DES NOURRISSONS
ET DES JEUNES ENFANTS D'OTTAWA

Some of the content discussed this evening may be difficult and sensitive. If you need to take a break or leave, please do.

If you would like to reach out for more support please contact:

- Distress Centre of Ottawa (bilingual)
 - Call: 613-238-3311
 - Text: 343-306-5550 (10am-11pm)
- TAO Tel-Aide (français): 613-741-6433
- [CounsellingConnect.org](https://www.CounsellingConnect.org)



Practice Change Champions

Hosted by the Infant and Early Childhood Mental
Health-Education and Awareness (IECMH-EA)
Task Group, a part of the Ottawa Child & Youth
Initiative





Welcome



Let's Get to Know Each Other: Poll



UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

May 25, 2022

Presented by: Carmela Savoia



Defining Mental Health

- What is Mental Health?
 - *Generic term used to signify mental disorders*
- What is Mental Health?
 - *It's a **reflection** of the social-emotional capacities and the influence of the quality of early relationships (primary)*
- What is Infant Mental Health?
 - *The social-emotional capacities and the influence of primary relationships allowing children to meet their developmental and emotional milestones.*



Defining Trauma

“an experience, or pattern of experiences, that impairs the proper functioning of the person’s stress-response system, making it more reactive or sensitive.”

(Dr. Bruce Perry)



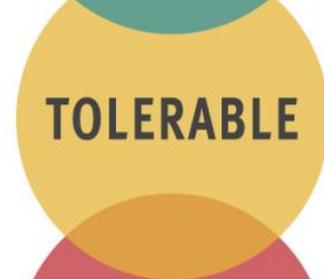
Trauma Categories

- **Acute trauma:** singular event
(earthquake, fire, assault, accident)
- **Chronic trauma:** adverse experiences that are repeated and prolonged
(ongoing exposure to family/community violence, chronic bullying, ongoing medical issues)
- **Complex trauma:** exposure to multiple adverse events from an early age that often happens within the caregiver system and without adequate adult support
(this has short and long term consequences in a number of developmental/health areas)
- **Historical trauma:** collective and cumulative adversity experienced by a group over generations, still suffering from the effects
(racial, systemic oppression)

Defining Trauma



Brief increases in heart rate,
mild elevations in stress hormone levels.



Serious, temporary stress responses,
buffered by supportive relationships.



Prolonged activation of stress
response systems in the absence
of protective relationships.

Toxic Stress

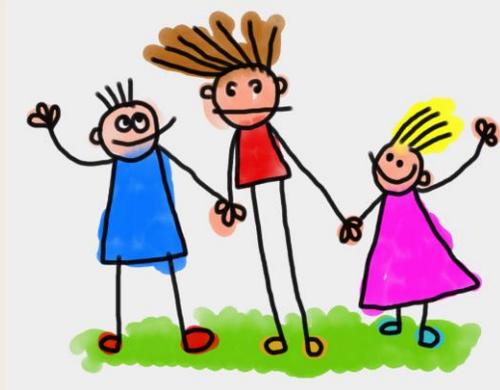
- The most severe impact on a child's development when *there is no adult to act as buffer* against the stress
 - The child's stress response stays activated – even when there is no apparent harm – due to absence of response from adult
 - Constant activation of stress response overloads developing systems (brain)
 - Over time, stress response is permanently set on “high alert”

Toxic Stress

- Impact of perpetual “high alert” stress response:
 - The areas of the brain committed to learning and reasoning have fewer, weaker neurons
 - Prolonged activation of stress response in early childhood results in fewer neurons at a time when the child’s brain should be growing new connections
 - This in turn affects the brain’s ability to make more complex neuron connections that lead to the acquisition of core competencies such as “executive function”

Signs of Toxic Stress

- Dysregulation
- Inconsolable
- Learning delays
- Speech delays
- Aggression
- Placid
- Hyper-vigilant
- Attachment difficulties
- Misread social cues
- Fear
- Decreased or no trust



- Permanent changes to brain architecture
- Long-term health implications
- Affects immune system
- Increased risk and frequency of infections
- Depressive disorders
- PTSD (children and adults)
- Substance use

Breakout Question

- Reflecting on the information presented, how does this inform your own perspective of working with children and parents:



- From a professional perspective, how would you practice your work with children/families differently:

Understanding Context

- A child's development is partly determined by what they experience in the settings where the child spends time
- The relationship between a child and his environment is “mutually shaping”
- The number and quality of the interactions between the various settings has an important influence on a child's development

Understanding Context

- The most significant systems for infants are their relational experiences starting with their primary or first caregiver
- The quality of the first relational experience is the one after which all other relationships will be modelled
 - Brainstems form a foundational response to external experiences by 3 months of age
 - It is physiologically impossible to “spoil” an infant



Understanding Context

- The number and quality of the interactions between the primary caregiver and child have an important influence on a child's development.
- Relationships are central to development
 - *Good relationships = good healthy development*
 - *Attachment and bonding*
 - *Quantity **and** quality time*



The Brain's Function

■ The brain grows

- *through patterned repetitive experiences*
- *and is “use dependent” – meaning the brain organizes itself to reflect the child’s environment*
 - *Increased and strengthened synaptic (neuron) connections through repetition*
 - *Wither through disuse*
 - *Early childhood experiences determine how our genetic potential is expressed – or not (B. Perry)*
- *Experience-based brain development in the first few years of life sets in motion the neurological and biological pathways for – health – learning - behaviour*

You are your brain

(Dr. Jean Clinton)

- Attachment, self-regulation, executive function (reasoning)
 - *Children are not born with these skills – they are born with the potential to develop them*
- Whatever your brain's first experience, is what the template will be for all subsequent similar experiences
- That “template” creates a “default” that allows us to tolerate different experiences
(Dr. Bruce Perry)

- *Good expects good*
- *Hurt expects hurt*



Good News!!

- THE GREAT THING ABOUT OUR BRAINS IS THAT THEY CAN ADAPT AND IMPROVE QUICKLY AS SOON AS WE'RE *GIVEN THE SUPPORT WE NEED*.
- Even children with extreme trauma histories and seemingly insurmountable deficits can catch up to their chronological age remarkably fast.

- (Dr. Bruce Perry)



Core strengths for healthy childhood development

(Dr. Bruce Perry)

- Attachment
- Self-regulation
- Affiliation
- Awareness
- Tolerance
- Respect



Creating Opportunities

- Humans are biologically designed to be part of a whole.
 - *Creating opportunities for connections*
 - *Creating opportunities for regulated, repetitive patterned physical activity*
 - *Creating opportunities for secure relationships*

Creating Opportunities

*“Human beings of all ages are happiest and able to deploy their talents to the best advantage when they experience **trusted others** as “standing behind them”.* (John Bowlby)

- Secure attachment with at least 1 supportive/secure relationship
 - *Creates potential to do well and get better from trauma*

- Kind, insightful, caring, supportive, etc.
 - *Creates the seed of resilience*

 - *Kin, teacher, coach, daycare provider, neighbour*

 - *Connections that are life sustaining – not attached to services*

Creating Opportunities

- Most important way we learn anything is in the *context* of the relationship
 - *Quality* of that context matters
 - Allows you to leave your comfort zone
 - *Creates safety*
 - *Opens to new learning and experiences*

Creating the right environment

- Small successes lead to bigger ones
 - *(with less stress) Practice the skills we already have to....*
 - Build new skills with the intentional responses we need
 - Stronger brain circuits come through practice (repetitive experiences) in situations that matter (positive, supported)



**When a flower
doesn't bloom
you fix the
environment
in which it
grows, not
the flower.**

Alexander Den Heijer

Breakout Question

- What are some of the ways that we can create the “right” environment:



- What are some of the small successes that could lead to bigger successes:
 - *Working with children*
 - *Working with parents*

Creating Opportunities

- Secure attachment with at least 1 supportive/secure relationship
 - Creates potential to do well and get better from trauma
- Kind, insightful, caring, supportive, etc.
 - Creates the seed of resilience
 - Kin, teacher, coach, daycare provider, neighbour
 - Connections that are life sustaining – not attached to services

*“Successful parenting is a principle key
to the mental health of the next
generation.”*

(John Bowlby)



Reciprocal connectedness

- Genetically programmed to seek secure relationships from caregiver
- Attachment systems are activated and need relationships from parents
- Parents are secure base from which child can explore and learn
- Reciprocal connectedness = attunement

Context vs Content

- Most important way we learn anything/new things most efficiently is in the *context* of relationships
 - *Quality of that context matters*
 - *Allows you to leave your comfort zone*
 - *Creates safety*
 - *Opens to new learning and experiences*
- Within personal and professional context



Creating Opportunities

- Addressing the impact of trauma:
 - *The key to success is patterned, repetitive activities that the child can experience routinely and consistently*

“Akeelah and the bee”



Creating Opportunities

- Addressing attachment concerns:
 - *Baby will grow in a nurturing, trusting environment by:*
 - Established routine that promotes baby's feelings of security
 - *Look me in the eyes – direct eye contact*
 - *Smile at me when you speak to me*
 - *Comfort me when I cry by holding and rocking me*
 - *Spend unhurried time with me*
 - *Hold me in your arms to feed me*
 - *Sing to me when I wake up from my nap*
 - *Take me for a walk and hold my hand*
 - *Tell me at least 3 times a day how special I am to you*
 - *Sit with me when I do my homework – you can read a book too!*
 - *Let me help you cook/garden/some other special project*
 - *Spend time talking to me – tell me about me (positive things)*
 - *Play with me – peek-a-boo, hide and seek, pretend role play*



Creating Opportunities

- Addressing self-regulation concerns:
 - *Baby will develop self-regulation over time. Self-regulation (able to notice and control primary urges or feelings) is an essential skill that can only be learned – we are not born with it.*
 - Always and consistently respond to my cries
 - I will learn, in time, to trust that you will meet my needs
 - Use a calm tone when you speak with me
 - Redirect me before I get out of hand – anticipate what might set me off
 - Be my role-model – regulate yourself to show me how to control myself
 - Use play time with me to teach me about being calm
 - Make my routine as predictable as possible and tell me what to expect when we are in a new situation
 - Tell me how well I am doing when I am calm, following the routine or showing that I can keep myself in control

Creating Opportunities

- Addressing trauma-related deficits:
 - *Speech delays:*
 - Read to me every day for 15 minutes while we cuddle
 - Let's make up our own stories at least once a week and allow me to add to the story while we cuddle
 - Help me sound out my words and play word games with me
 - Take me for walks and let's name the things we see along the way, while you hold my hand
 - Help me find ways to succeed so you can encourage me to keep learning
 - Look at me when we talk because your eye contact with me is so important to help me pay attention and feel connected

Creating Opportunities

- Simple ways to build connections (J. Clinton)
 - *Be at the child's level for direct face-to-face interactions*
 - *Use a pleasant, calm voice, simple language and eye contact*
 - *Show interest during play – let the child lead*
 - *Set child up for success – what activities help them succeed*
 - *Be genuine and clear about praising accomplishments/behaviour*
 - *Pick your battles carefully – learning to ignore certain behaviours*
 - *Novelty – a huge powerful learning tool – as child gets excited about something (experience connection) areas of their brain open up to learning*

Keeping in mind.....

- *Talking*, for children who have experienced trauma, does not help the brain to organize itself nor to repair the damage caused by developmental abuses
- The earlier sensory integration happens, the more self-regulation increases
- Motor movements help metabolize stress hormones
 - *Rhythmic activities – singing, dance, drumming, jump rope, mindful walks, hula hooping, swinging – and.....*
 - Somatosensory activities – outside play, water play, sand play, play dough
 - create a “quiet corner” for calming with a favorite blanket and some soft toys.

Dr. B. Perry's 6 R's for Healing Trauma

- Relational (safe)
 - *Spending quality time in activity with the parent - nurturing*
- Relevant (developmentally matched to the child)
- Repetitive (patterned)
 - *The earliest patterned, repetitive rhythmic activity is in utero – mother's heart rate – infant's neural patterns associated with getting needs met and feeling safe in the womb*
- Rewarding (pleasurable)
- Rhythmic (meaningful with neural patterns)
 - *Any neural network activated in a repetitive way will change*
- Respectful (of the child, family and culture)

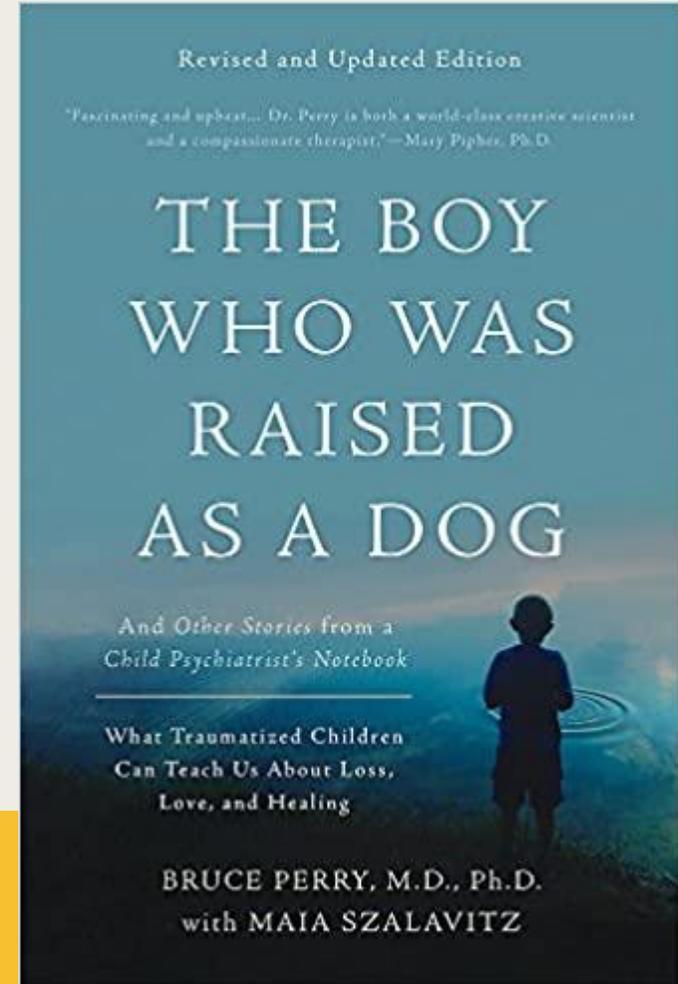
“If only parents knew the huge capacity they had to reach out to their children through relationship”

(Dr. Jean Clinton)





Book Drawing!



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Next meeting:

September 21, 2022





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Growing Up Great



Thank you for being Practice Change Champions!

A follow up survey will be emailed to you, along with some links to resources to support deeper understanding of these topics.

If you need a letter of participation, please email info@growingupgreat.ca

Learn more about OCYI and the IECMH-EA Task Group at ocyi.ca

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