Recognizing and Addressing Developmental Trauma: A Necessary Step for Effective Service Delivery with High-Needs Children and Youth

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The plan...

- Introductions
- Developmental trauma: A lens to prevent and reduce the impact of childhood trauma
- Dr. Susan Dundas: Developmental trauma’s impact on the brain
- Mary-Jo Land: Developmental trauma in families and schools
- Leticia Gracia: Developmental trauma in mental health setting
- Dr. Charlie Menendez: Developmental trauma in residential treatment
- Discussion and questions
Developmental Trauma

A Perspective for Understanding and Addressing Complexity
Introduction to developmental trauma

- The current picture of DSM diagnoses:
  - diagnoses are limiting
  - limited efficacy
  - limited outcomes
- One note when we need a symphony
- Leaves out relationships in the causal and healing processes
- Pathology oriented
- Current treatment protocols are often off the mark
Alphabet Soup

ODD
BPD
ASD
DID
FASD
RAD
ADHD
PTSD
GAD
PTSD
Developmental Trauma
Using the lens of developmental trauma:

- Brain and body adapt to toxic stress, abuse, neglect and loss
- Adaptation to survive vs irreparable damage
- Adaptive and wellness perspective
- A complex spectrum
- Requires a complex spectrum of intervention / support / treatment that includes the family
- What happened to you? (not, what is wrong with you?) & You are more than what happened to you.
- Elicits compassion, reduces blame and shame

Relationships are Key
The three types of ACEs include:

**ABUSE**
- Physical
- Emotional
- Sexual

**NEGLECT**
- Physical
- Emotional
- Divorce

**HOUSEHOLD DYSFUNCTION**
- Mental Illness
- Incarcerated Relative
- Mother treated violently
- Substance Abuse
Developmental Trauma: The Costs

Possible Risk Outcomes:

**BEHAVIOR**
- Lack of physical activity
- Smoking
- Alcoholism
- Drug use
- Missed work

**PHYSICAL & MENTAL HEALTH**
- Severe obesity
- Diabetes
- Depression
- Suicide attempts
- STDs
- Heart disease
- Cancer
- Stroke
- COPD
- Broken bones
As the number of ACEs increases, so does the risk for negative health outcomes.
Developmental Trauma and the Brain
Developing Brain Through a Trauma Lens

1. Attachment
2. Biology/Brain
3. Affect regulation
4. Behavioural control
5. Dissociation
6. Cognition
7. Self-concept/self-care
Goals:

UNDERSTAND HOW EXPERIENCE SHAPES THE BRAIN

THE IMPACTS OF TRAUMA ON THE BRAIN

THE PHYSIOLOGY OF TRAUMA AND ITS EXTENSIVE EFFECTS.

- Kezelman & Stravopoulus (2012)
Brain Development

Brains raised in an environment that is unpredictable, dangerous, and threatening can be compromised, leading to damage of biological systems, tissues and organs.

Chaos, pervasive fear, and direct violence in early childhood can result in strongly entrenched brain connections and chemical tendencies that are vulnerable and sensitive.

- Haskell (2009)
Brains Develop from the Bottom Up

“Complex” structures of brain (neocortex): control complex functions (language, abstract thinking)

Limbic System: controls emotion processing, self-regulation, arousal, memory formation

“Lower” (primitive) structures of the brain control simple regulatory functions (heart rate, body temperature, sleep, appetite)

- Zilberstein (2014)
Trauma impacts:
Brain Development and Hormones

Adrenaline
- Increased heart rate
- Blood flows to muscles
- Breaks down fat to make energy available

Cortisol
- Breaks down protein to make energy available
- Impairs ability to fight disease
- *Too much* leads to changes in brain activity and brain structure
Trauma on the Brain
Areas of the Brain Impacted by Hormones

**Hippocampus**
- Where **learning and explicit memory** are stored & organised
- Smaller in people who have experienced long-term trauma

**Amygdala**
- Responsible for **emotions such as fear and anxiety**
- Processing negative events
- Can become more sensitive to negative emotions

**Pre-frontal Cortex**
- Responsible for executive functioning
- The **learning part of the brain**
- Information about social environment
Trauma Impacts Relationships

Children and youth with trauma histories may:

• Experience the absence of a secure, predictable caregiver

• Be unable to regulate distress, unable to soothe themselves and do not develop competent means of regulating negative emotions

• Have trouble relying on others to help them regulate their emotions

• Experience excessive anxiety, anger & longings to be taken care of, as well as a sense of hopelessness

• Experience people/the world as unsafe, unpredictable or unsafe.

• Carry an unsafe relationship model to their future relationships and environments

- Van der Kolk (2005)
Learning Skills: Skills Affected by Executive Functioning issues

1. **Impulsive Control** (Stop and Think)
   Blurt things out, rush through homework, quit halfway through, trouble following rules

2. **Emotional Control** (Ability to manage their feelings) Difficultly managing feelings by keeping an end goal in mind, trouble with negative feedback, gets upset easily
Executive Skills continued:

3. **Flexibility** (roll with the punches)
   Trouble seeing options, difficulty changing course

3. **Working Memory** (hold information in mind)
   Trouble with multi-step tasks, difficulty remembering directions, taking notes or following directions.

3. **Self-Monitoring** (Keep on track)
   Lack self-awareness, don’t know how to check work, can not tell if strategies are working, poor self assessment

(www.understood.org)
Executive Skills continued:

6. **Planning and prioritizing:** (step needed to reach a goal)
   Easily overwhelmed trying to break tasks into smaller, manageable chunks, trouble seeing the main idea.

6. **Task Initiation:** (getting started on something)
   Can be seen as lazy or procrastinating, can be overwhelmed and freeze and do nothing.

6. **Organization:** (keep track of information)
   Constantly loses things, misplaces things; they can’t find a way to get organized even when there are negative consequences to being disorganized.

(www.understood.org)
Emotions

*Individuals may experience difficulties with:*

- Labelling emotions
- Regulating emotional arousal
- Understanding how to tolerate distress
- Knowing when to trust his/her own emotional responses
- Discriminating emotional expressions in others
A trigger is “something that sets off a memory tape or flashback transporting the person back to the event of her/his original trauma”

Univ. of Alberta, Sexual Assault Centre
Parenting children who have experienced developmental trauma
sum of parents’ capacity + supports must be > sum of children’s needs
Relationships are key

Early trauma and neglect in the caregiving environment... are healed through relationships...
Working with families

Parenting >
Early trauma and neglect

Traditional Parenting

Therapeutically enhanced parenting
Building Trust

Creating Safety

Unconditional Positive Regard

Calm
Empathic
Curious
Consistent
Responsive
Sensitive
Kind
Playful
Accepting
Off to school...

- “I don’t feel safe!”
- “My senses are overwhelming me”
- “My body is out of my control”
- “Everyone is mean”
- “I’m so stupid”
- “I hate school”
Blocked Care
Compromised capacity to do caregiving behaviours
Blocked Trust

Adaptive Responses to feel safe

Fight

Hide

Change Constantly
Recognizing signs of safety to build trust
Missing the Mark with “Evidence Based Practices”
Children and Youth in Residential Care: A Highly Specialized Group
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Relationships are Key
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Developmental Trauma Triggers

- Distress
- Loss (Actual or Anticipated)
- Closeness
- Distance
- Correction
- Success
Relationships are Key
Intergenerational Transmission of Developmental Trauma

Good Enough Parenting

Disrupted Parenting
Developmental Trauma: Next Steps

- Figure what we know and what we don’t know
- The lens of developmental trauma helps us use the tools we have more effectively and to create more effective tools
- Education and professional develop
- Cross-sector co-ordination: families, schools, mental health, child welfare, justice, housing, Indigenous Peoples services, poverty prevention, racism reduction
- Healing Childhood Trauma means Preventing Childhood Trauma
- The Long Game
The Developmental Trauma Action Alliance

Cross-sector stakeholders
Province-wide campaign HEALING CHILDHOOD TRAUMA TOGETHER
Raising awareness of developmental trauma
For prevention and healing

adoption.on.ca/developmental-trauma
Discussion and Questions

Thank you from
Developmental Trauma Action Alliance