**Overview: *Understanding and Managing Trauma***

Things to think about and share with your programs:

*What types of trauma our children may face and how the impact of that trauma can affect how our children learn and behave during their time with us.* Before we can understand how trauma can affect a child, we first need to understand stress and how our bodies cope with stress.

**Stress:** Stress works on a continuum. We all experience stress at one time or another. We can use this spectrum or one like it to describe how much stress we are experiencing. We can also use a spectrum to identify when we need to take a break.

Using a spectrum is very helpful with dealing with the stress of our students. Typically, we address stress in our students when they have reached a 9 or 10 on a 1-10 spectrum of stress. Waiting until a student has reached a 9 or 10 is too late. It is a part of our goal as professionals to begin noticing when a child is in the 4-7 zones. If we can address stress at a lower level, we will be able to calm the student down before they act out. There are many stressors that we face every day.

It is important to note that sometimes, as adults we de-value the stressors of children. We think that because our worries may be more complicated, the “easy” stress that a child may face is less serious. However, the stress that a child experiences over friends, homework, and testing will impact them in the same way that high stress can impact an adult who is stressed about a sick parent, financial problems, or work/life balance.

**We need to acknowledge that a child is stressed and that it needs attention.**

**Stress Response System:**

Here is the process of the stress response system. Under normal stress when the brain senses dangerit sends signals to the body. Chemicals are released as the body prepares the fight, flight or freeze response.

 When the danger is alleviated, the body is meant to return to a state of **homeostasis, a state of calm**.

**When the stress response system is activated reactions are instinctive, thinking is not involved, and the conscious mind is not involved. The Stress Response System protects our body from any avoidable danger.**

**Often children experiencing constant stress never achieve homeostasis state. Instead of rebooting to a state of calm they are triggered right back to “danger”.**

There are 3 main brain components that are activated during the stress response system.

**These 3 brain components live in what is called the Limbic Brain. The Limbic Brain supports a variety of functions, including emotional reactions and survival skills.**

**The 3 brain components involved in the stress response system are the amygdala, the hypothalamus, and the hippocampus.**

 The **amygdala**, (The Police Officer) is where danger is first perceived. The amygdala will alert the hypothalamus and the hippocampus into action.

The **hypothalamus**, (The Personal Trainer) gets the body ready for action. It tells the endocrine system to secrete stress hormones, such as adrenaline and cortisol which can prepare the body to respond to threat or danger. In addition, the heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing all increase. Blood rushes to the muscles while digestion and the immune system are switched off.

The **hippocampus**, (The Secretary) stores memories based on our life experiences. Our past experiences and perceptions can be used in future situations to help guide us to our responses. These “gut responses” are not coming from our thinking brain. They are instinctive and come from the survival part of our brain.

**When a child is faced with continuous stressors they can get stuck in the stress response system and stuck in their limbic brain. To think, behave, and learn a child must be functioning in their Frontal Lobe or the thinking brain. If a child is stuck in the limbic brain they are incapable of learning in your classroom.**

****

**An easy analogy:**

Imagine that your hand is your brain; **your palm** represents your Brain Stem which is responsible for Autonomic (“automatic”) functions, like breathing, and our heartbeat. **Your thumb** represents your Limbic Brain or wild animal brain which is responsible survival instincts like fight, flight, or freeze, as well as your emotional reactions and fears. Tuck your thumb into your palm and close your 4 fingers over your thumb. **These fingers over your thumb** represent your Frontal Cortex or thinking brain which is responsible for your perception, motor action, speech, higher processing and what we normally call “thinking.”

 When we are stressed, overwhelmed, or trying to deal with traumatic or painful memories, the frontal cortex shuts down; it no longer functions. You have flipped your lid and let your wild animal brain run wild! *Demonstrate this by lifting your 4 fingers up.*

 To get back to yourself, you need to calm down and bring the thinking brain back on top of our animal brain to keep it in the cage!

**3 types of stress:**

Our stress response system is regularly activated throughout our day. There are 3 types of stress that some of our students may face. Though we all experience stress, not everyone experiences traumatic stress.

* **Positive stress** is stress that comes from positive events and interactions in life.

Examples of positive stress include the first day of school, joining a new club or sport, or important milestones like Prom or Graduation. This stress is short lived and is alleviated by strong support from family and friends.

* **Tolerable stress** is everyday stress that needs managed.

Students may feel tolerable stress when they are overwhelmed with homework or testing. They may feel tolerable stress at home with a separation of parents or moving to a new school. This stress needs to be addressed and managed. This stress is also be alleviated by strong support from friends and family.

* **Traumatic stress** is stress that creates prolonged activation of the stress response system.

Children who experience traumatic stress may never get an opportunity to return to a calm state. These children often lack positive adult support that can buffer the stressors they experience. This doesn’t necessarily mean that a child lacks positive adult relationships in their lives, but they may not share with their trusted adults that they have experienced a trauma at all. Therefore, these children will have to cope with this trauma alone.

**Signs of stress:**

***Physical signs*: headaches, digestive problems, sleep (too much or too little), ache and pains, illness, and injuries.**

***Emotional signs*: irritability, anger outbursts, depression, anxiety, withdrawn, nightmares, and mental fatigue.**



**Trauma:**

A child that has experienced trauma has experienced a real or perceived threat to themselves or a loved one, or experiences continuous feelings of terror, horror, helplessness, or fear.

**Experiencing trauma can permanently set a child’s stress system on high alert.**

A child that has experienced trauma has experienced a real or perceived threat to themselves or a loved one, or experiences continuous feelings of terror, horror, helplessness, or fear.

A child can be exposed to trauma in several ways. The child may be directly exposed to a trauma, like experiencing a house fire or child abuse.

They may also witness the trauma, like witnessing domestic or community violence. They may also experience trauma by learning of a traumatic event that has happened to a close loved one.

* **Direct Exposure**= Being the target or victim of the trauma
* **Witnessed Event**= Seeing, hearing, or witnessing the aftermath of the trauma- even on TV
* **Trauma to Loved One**= Learning that a traumatic event occurred to a close friend or family

**Types of trauma:**

**Acute trauma** occurs in a particular time and place: school shootings, gang-related violence in the community, terrorist attacks, natural disasters, serious accidents, dog bites

**Chronic trauma** is exposure to trauma that can occur repeatedly over long periods of time: some forms of physical abuse, long-standing sexual abuse, domestic violence, war and other forms of political violence.

**Traumatic Grief** is coping with the death of an important person in one's life.

**Complex Trauma** is multiple interpersonal traumatic events from a very young age and recurring over a long period of time. Complex trauma is chronic trauma stacked on top of itself.

**How does trauma impact our children?**

**Cognitive: Trauma can affect a child's attention and executive functioning.** The impact can make it difficult for children to utilize their higher level abstract thought. Students may experience intrusive traumatic memories which can interfere with the ability to focus and think clearly at school. They can also struggle with memory and recall for testing.

 Children who have experienced trauma can score up to 8 points lower in an IQ evaluation.

**Emotional: When a child experiences trauma it can affect the way they regulate their emotions**. Trauma triggers can especially put a child a risk for acting out emotionally.

 They may also have a difficult time articulating how they feel due to a lack of emotional literacy and appropriate vocabulary. These children come to school with 3 emotional crayons. They can use happy, sad, and angry. They may also have a difficult time understanding the complexity of emotions in others. This may cause conflict with staff and peers. A child needs to be equipped with a 64 box of emotional crayons to be able to accurately articulate their needs.

**Social:** Experiencing trauma can create conflict and difficulty in forming and maintaining relationships. A child who has experienced trauma may have trouble forming trust in a relationship. They may overreact to interpersonal conflict. Past experiences may lead them to be aggressive as a part of what they believe to be “normal.”

 These children desire connection with others; however, they may not have had past role models that help them understand healthy connection and relationships. Because of this, they may enter into abusive relationships, participate in high risk sexual behavior, or isolate themselves from relationships entirely.



**Flashback reaction:** Think about those incidents where you can’t quite place what caused the behavior…

When a child experiences a traumatic event, their brain makes connections related not just to the trauma, but to what they see, smell, taste and feel. This is not a conscious process. When a child sees, smells, or feels a similar experience, their brain will push them into the stress response system. A child may not even be aware of what specifically made them upset. All they know is that they suddenly feel bad or scared. Even years after a traumatic experience, a trauma reminder can still have a powerful impact.

**Strategies of support:**

**Preventive strategies:**

Teachers need to implement preventive measures that support **ALL** children in the classroom. This builds a strong foundation for emotional/social development that all children need to be more successful. Often these preventative measures are what we refer to as best practice techniques. We will now move into some strategies that you can use to help children stay calm, avoid triggers, and return to their thinking brain.

**3 General rules:**

***CLASSROOM ARRANGEMENT:*** The first rule is to arrange your classroom with a trauma lens. I want you to think about the space in your classroom. Make sure that there is enough space in common areas, and that clutter is at a minimum. Congestion and clutter can be triggering for students and they don’t have control of the classroom environment.

Also, make sure to avoid blind corners. Blind corners can allow for bullying and triggering events. A child may be triggered simply by sitting in a certain area of the classroom. It may be worthwhile to ask students where in the classroom they would be able to learn best. (Not by their best friend!) Ask the child, “Where would you feel safe sitting in the classroom?”

***SET CLEAR EXPECTATIONS:*** With the children’s guidance establish general rules and post them. Use positive redirection- Try not to assume that the child knows what they are “supposed” to do. Reinforce the rules not only when they are broken, but also when they are followed- be consistent.

***CONSIDER SAFETY:*** Try to avoid participating in power struggles with a child. When you are involved in a power struggle, both you and the child are working in your limbic brains. Give each other time to breathe and calm down before discussing the issue. Limits and procedures for common areas (high traffic areas). Watch for bullying and teasing behavior and put an end to it.

****

**Identifying their emotions:** Helping children to identify and verbally express feelings often becomes a large component for emotional development. When a child can openly express their feelings, they feel comfortable in the learning environment. The larger their emotional vocabulary, the more capable they are of getting their immediate and long term needs met. It can be beneficial for you as the teacher to express your own feelings. It is OK if a child sees that you experience a variety of feelings too.

Not only should feelings be able to verbalize emotions, but every child should have tools to be able to manage the feelings that they experience. Sometimes it can be difficult to manage emotions. As educators, we can provide students with tools that can help them cope with their emotions and discover alternative ways to meet their needs.

**I know a lot of our providers are already doing this, but it’s important to reinforce the techniques they already have in place do hold value!**

**Deep breathing techniques**: Breathing is the number one way to get into your thinking brain. Breathing should be done at the beginning of every day, every class, and after any distraction, for example, unexpected announcements, classroom disruptions, any change in routine.

There are many ways that you can teach a child to deep breathe, just remember it needs to be **taught** and modeled. Telling a child to take a deep breathe is not teaching them HOW to do it correctly. You can use belly breathing, butterfly breathing, sunshine breathing, balloon breathing. You can also use count breathing which is better for older students.

*Belly Breathing, Balloon Breathing*, *Butterfly Breathing*, *Count Breathing* are just a few examples of deep breathing techniques for children.

**Stretching:** Stretching is another great strategy for you to help children step down their energy after being active or when you notice energy levels are high. This helps the children regroup and regain focus. Implementing deep breathes and stretches as needed can be a great way to begin any and all large/small group activities (i.e., circle time, traveling from gross motor area to classroom, cooking activities, etc). Progressive relaxation is a great additional way for students to relax in times of stress. This example is good for younger students.



**Positive talk**: We all have that voice in our heads that tell us we are not good enough. It is important to talk with those older children about this negative voice. Remind them that they are not the only one who has this voice. Help the student replace the negative with positive. This will strengthen their self concept.

**Become the child’s positive voice in their head. Give all children those positive phrases.**



**Intervention strategies:**

If a child is having a traumatic reaction in the classroom it is important for you to stay calm. Take some deep breaths so that you can stay in your thinking brain!

 You need to use a calm and soothing voice and avoid asking the child what is wrong at this time. This is not the appropriate time for that discussion. Instead use the Limbic Defibrillator. This can be done by asking the child an off topic/nonrelated question to quickly change the child’s focus.

**The Limbic Defibrillator** is a way that you can quickly move a child from their animal brain to their thinking brain. A child will not be able to calm down until they are in their thinking brain. To implement the Limbic Defibrillator, you begin by making bland observations like “I see you’re wearing blue, do you like the color blue?” This will redirect the student’s brain to their thinking brain for a moment. During that moment, ask the child to take a deep breath. The child may slide back into their animal brain and will need another bland observation and deep breath.

 Repeat this process until the child has calmed enough to take regular deep breaths on their own. They are now ready to utilize a calming tool.

**Calming tools:** Using a calming caddy/basket is an intervention strategy that can be used when a student needs to calm down before they can return to the learning environment. For the calming caddy to be successful, every child in the classroom must have an opportunity to use items from the calming caddy throughout the day. It can be used as a reward or during transitions. By using this intervention strategy regularly through the day, you can use these items for students who are experiencing a traumatic reaction **without the stigma** of “only bad” kids get to use the calming caddy!

The calming caddy can also be used as a secondary prevention. You may want to give a child an item from the calming caddy if they are reaching high levels of anxiety. This item can lower their anxiety levels and prevent an outburst.

There are many items that you can include in your calming caddy/basket including coloring materials, pipe cleaners, Playdoh, Sparkle jars, Pinwheels, and Squeeze items.

**Things to remember…**

-Establishing strong trusting relationships can go a long way.

-Preventive strategies should be used with all children.

-Positivity provided in your classroom may be the only positivity this child receives on a consistent basis. Help them create that positive voice that lives inside their head.

-Verbally acknowledge children’s efforts for positive behavior/making good choices. Often behavior charts cause more harm than good due to labeling children.

-Encourage educators to incorporate self care strategies into their personal daily/weekly/monthly routine.

**Other helpful resources:**

-Sesame street: Has lots of resources for teachers regarding various topics from incarceration to ADHD; *sesamestreet.org/toolkits*

-Fernside: has adapted incarceration services to help families