

# Trauma-informed Teaching and Design Strategies

## A New Paradigm

by Ileen Schwartz-Henderson

You have a new child in your classroom. Her name is Celia, and when you meet her, she averts her eyes. She never speaks in class or to other children, puts her head on her desk during lessons and seems to be off in her own world, unreachable. You have another new student, Max, who is always fighting and disrupts lessons by calling out. It seems like he is always moving his body when he shouldn't be, and he is often sent home by a frustrated administration. Another student, Maria, seems bright and interested in classroom content, but misses multiple days of school in a row without explanation.



Ileen Schwartz-Henderson, MEEd, is the National Director of the Bright Space Program for The Bright Horizons Foundation for Children. Bright Spaces are unique play and family spaces that create a safe place for children impacted by trauma to grow and heal. These spaces are in many types of settings including emergency and transitional housing, domestic violence shelters, prison visiting rooms, Neonatal Intensive Care waiting rooms, food pantries, reunification sites, child protection centers, and any place where children are in crisis. Ileen has had a long career in Early Childhood as a teacher, administrator and trainer, early interventionist, program developer and manager of overall operations in a broad variety of settings. Ileen is the author and owner of the parenting curriculum for at-risk mothers of very young children, *My Baby's First Teacher*.® The Bright Space program leverages the expertise of the thousands of Bright Horizons employee volunteers across the country to create and sustain Bright Spaces. As the National Director, she provides technical assistance to programs across the country that are interested in creating trauma-informed child and family spaces in their community through the Bright Space program. She develops trainings for volunteers, staff, and families and helps develop new programs and partnerships to utilize the Bright Space as a portal for services and resources to support children in crisis.

These examples probably do not seem extraordinary to you and I am sure you can think of children like these who you have encountered throughout your career. As a committed early childhood educator, you know your job is to try to reach 'difficult' children, provide them with necessary support, and advocate for their opportunity to learn. Unfortunately, children like these can sometimes take away the bulk of your limited available time to work with the whole group of children you are responsible for. As much as you want to reach them, you are frustrated by the extra time they require, the seemingly willful way they resist your help, and the lack of support provided by the school.

Now imagine that scientists discover that all of these children are the victims of exposure to a toxic substance in their environments that has changed the structure of their brains. We learn that their repeated exposure to this danger, encountered in their daily lives, has substantially limited their ability to process information, express themselves in developmentally appropriate ways, and to control their actions, bodies, and emotions. They are the victims of a poison comparable to lead paint, tobacco, or mercury exposure, and the number of children exposed is growing. Continued disruption of classes will limit school resources and burn out good teachers. If untreated, these kids

will have elevated risk for smoking, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, domestic violence, depression, and suicide.

In fact, there is such a toxic exposure at work in many cases. A landmark study, begun in the late 1990s with continuing results today, examined the long-term consequences of what we now call toxic stress, as well as its cause: ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences). The negative experiences that happen in the early years have been shown to have a serious detrimental impact on physical and emotional health throughout life and into adulthood and have been shown to cause early death. These experiences continue today in the form of abuse, neglect, or violence in the family and in the community, and they are on the rise.

Toxic exposure is a daily fact of life for nearly five million American children and families living in homelessness. If you extend that to include all children living in poverty, the number grows. If you further extend that to all of our children who are now exposed to violence through media, current events, and families in crisis — from work stress, domestic violence, and divorce — the numbers are staggering and the impact on the next generation is profound.

This is not to say that all stress is toxic. There is an important difference between the stresses of everyday life, which can build resilience, and the unrelenting stress associated with food insecurity, housing instability, family and community violence, substance abuse, and having a parent or caregiver who is absent emotionally for any reason. Repeated exposure to violent images and media without sufficient supportive interactions can have a similar secondhand effect.

In early childhood we know that learning to deal with stress is a part of normal and healthy development. The first day of school, a fire or auto accident, even the temporary loss of a home or separation from a parent can be a common part of growing up. Stress activates the body's response system to go on high alert flooding the system with cortisol and other stress hormones, and produces a rush of adrenaline that increases heart rate. In healthy development, the support of a caring adult will ease the child's experience and the body's response will wind down and returns to normal. In cases where the child does not have an adult to act as a buffer or there is no relief from the stressful situation, the body's stress response system overloads the system, stays on high alert, and can have potentially serious consequences over a lifetime. This toxic stress affects the neurons that assist with the development of important skills, such as self-management and executive function. When there is no dependable adult response to reinforce these neuronal connections, they die off and that area of the brain is either damaged or underdeveloped.

This phenomenon is not new and has had its effects throughout history, during slavery, wars, and now across the world when people are displaced and disenfranchised. What is new is how much we know about the clear physiological impact on the brain development

of our children and the implications of that impact on learning, how we teach, how we set up our classrooms, and how we view children's behavior. As poverty and violence in our communities increase, more and more children in our schools and early childhood programs are clearly displaying these symptoms and outcomes. What can we do to support children and help them to recover and to build these important skills despite the adversity and hardships they have experienced? In the same way one would encourage a child to strengthen an injured muscle, teachers need to help young children practice the missing skills to provide them with the foundation for later life success.

### Create a 'Trauma-informed' Classroom

Although we often have the knowledge of early childhood to create wonderful environments for typically-developing children, understanding trauma enables us to rethink some of our classroom design ideas. Memories and emotions from trauma can resurface often unpredictably in response to triggers in the environment. These may act to further embed the behavior patterns that were once coping mechanisms, but are now hurting the child's development. Knowing some common triggers and using a 'trauma lens' to view behaviors can inform our choices throughout the day's routine and in design and implementation of our programs.

### Triggers

Bright lights and colors, loud noises or unexpected noises, the entrance of strangers, and quick unpredictable changes in schedule can all trigger children's overactive stress-response systems. Give five-minute warnings before transitions to allow the hyper system to adjust to changes.

### Safety

All kids need to feel safe, but for those children who experienced toxic stress, a safe classroom can be a key factor in helping them to be successful. What does safety look like? What does that mean in your space? Children who are confined in shelters need ease of movement — not open space, but defined spaces that send clear messages about what behaviors are appropriate. Chairs and tables sized for kids help them feel comfortable and empowered. Conversely, having spaces where adults are also comfortable encourages adult-child interactions. Creating predictable and reasonable routines, a calm ambiance, and a predictable environment can build a sense of safety.

When you consider your physical design, ask yourself what made you feel emotionally safe in your own childhood space. Does the space feel uplifting and have color to enliven, but also warmth to soothe? Are there places to sit near others and space to be apart? Are there toys that are familiar and those that will challenge without frustrating? Are there enough toys to prevent boredom, but not so many that they overwhelm? Are they organized in a way that is reassuring and predictable?

### Executive Function and Self-regulation

Executive function and self-regulation skills enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and complete multiple tasks successfully. They include the skills known as working memory, which helps us to retain information and use it in varied ways over short periods of time; mental flexibility, which helps us to hold or shift our attention within different settings and with different people; and self-control, which enables us to resist impulsive actions or responses and take time to evaluate

a situation clearly. We know these skills are essential to a child's success in school and in later life. Toxic stress has clearly been shown to limit or slow the development of these important skills and this understanding gives us a strong direction for working with trauma-impacted kids. Just as we need to exercise to build up a weak muscle, these skills can be exercised through patient and supportive repetition and scaffolding of information. Engaging in activities that allow children to practice their basic skills and breaking tasks into smaller chunks will help them to feel confident and successful.

How can we support these needs? Try having more materials put away and out of sight, so that children can focus without becoming overwhelmed. Bring out more complex materials and introduce them in a one-on-one situation. Display materials in open containers so kids can see what is offered and make choices of materials that are familiar and non-threatening. Providing cause-and-effect activities to children early and giving immediate feedback provides success and builds confidence. Remember that building trusting relationships is the key to having a positive impact on children and their families.

## Building Resilience

Why do some children who experience toxic stress do better than others? The ability to survive stress is called resilience. Resilience is having a well-equipped toolkit of coping behaviors that allow children to react positively: to stop crying, to regulate behavior, to defer gratification. This toolkit is part genetics and part is built by strong relationships with caring adults. Numerous scientific studies support the conclusion that dependable, supportive, and responsive interactions can prevent or reverse the damaging effects of toxic stress. Playing peekaboo with an infant, asking open-ended questions with a

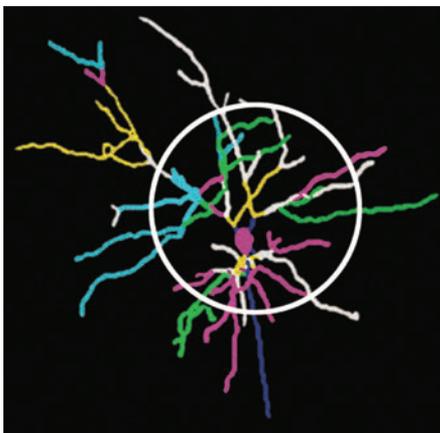
toddler, listening carefully and using the child's name will show you genuinely care. 'Serve and return' is the term used to describe how adults teach children about language and emotional responsiveness. Research shows that children raised in a language-rich environment early in life may have vocabularies two to three times larger than those raised without these important interactions. Additionally, this responsiveness builds emotional intelligence and an ability to form meaningful relationships throughout life.

## Changing the Paradigm

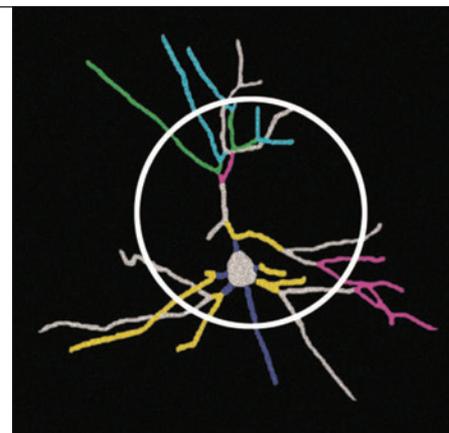
Having a trauma-informed approach to teaching can profoundly impact our approach to children, families, school/center programming, environmental design, and relationship building. More importantly perhaps, this approach can underlie our self-awareness, our preconceived notions about people and groups, and our approach to advocacy for programs and policies that will lessen toxic stress for all of the world's citizens. Remember that kids are never bad and although sometimes the world can seem bad, it can also be helpful and healing. Thoughtful, empathetic educators can

## Trauma-informed Classroom Design

- Have fewer materials on the shelves
- Change materials more frequently
- Provide a space for one child to work independently
- Provide a soft space to relax, if needed
- Minimize visual messages on walls and floor
- Provide décor that is culturally sensitive
- Lower or diffuse lighting and sound
- Provide self-serve snack without restrictions
- Sequence learning activities for all competencies



Typically developing cortex



Toxic stress impacted cortex

Brains subjected to toxic stress have underdeveloped neural connections in areas of the brain most important for successful learning and behavior in school and the workplace.

Source: Radley et al. (2004); Bock et al. (2005). Credit: Center on the Developing Child.

### Trauma-informed Teaching Strategies

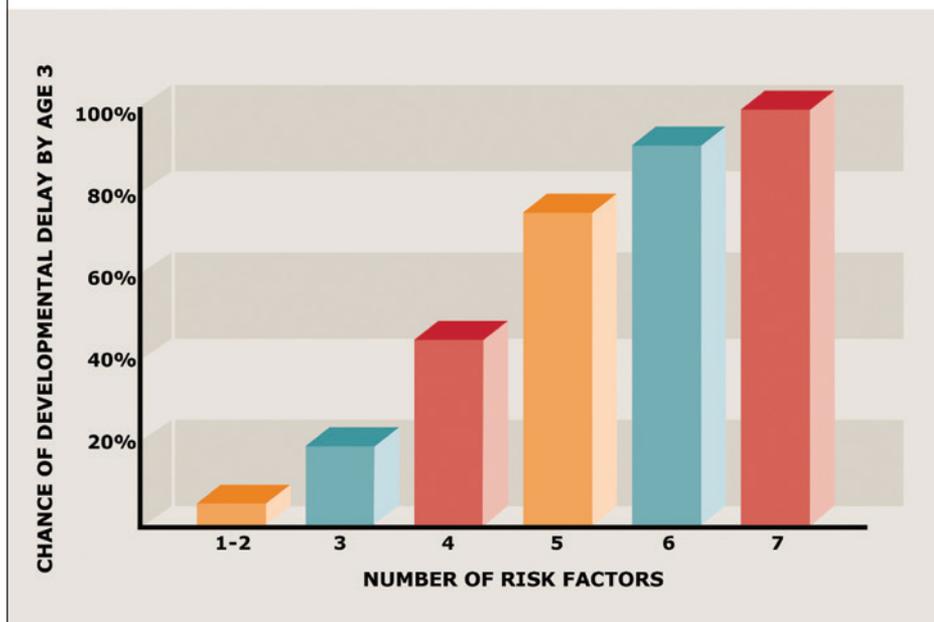
- Establish consistent, clear, and trauma-informed developmental expectations
- Understand children's changing needs by observing their daily routines and behaviors
- Help children identify, express, and label their emotions
- Provide multiple opportunities for children to make choices
- Celebrate the child's individuality and accomplishments often
- Teach and model alternative problem-solving strategies
- Break complex tasks into easy-to-follow directions
- Be clear and unambiguous in your communication
- Control your own emotions and do not personalize the misbehavior
- Give leadership opportunities instead of punishments
- Provide one-to-one time to demonstrate and coach
- Pick your battles

be the catalyst for healing for our most vulnerable children.

### Sources

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2005/2014). Excessive Stress Disrupts the Architecture of the Developing Brain: Working Paper No. 3.

## Significant Adversity Impairs Development in the First Three Years



Significant adversity impairs development in the first three years of life — and the more adversity a child faces, the greater the odds of a developmental delay. Indeed, risk factors such as poverty, caregiver mental illness, child maltreatment, single parent, and low maternal education have a cumulative impact: in this study, maltreated children exposed to as many as six additional risks face a 90-100% likelihood of having one or more delays in their cognitive, language, or emotional development.

Source: Barth et al. (2008)

Center on the Developing Child  HARVARD UNIVERSITY  
[www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu)

Updated Edition. Retrieved:  
[www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu)

Hart, B., & Risley, T. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experiences of young American children*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes.

### Resources

#### Websites

Child Safety Commissioner. (2007). Calmer classrooms: A guide to working with traumatized children. Retrieved: [http://www.cyp.vic.gov.au/childsafetycommissioner/downloads/calmer\\_classrooms.pdf](http://www.cyp.vic.gov.au/childsafetycommissioner/downloads/calmer_classrooms.pdf)

National Child Traumatic Stress Network. The Impact of Trauma

on Learning. <http://www.nctsn.org/resources/audiences/school-personnel/effects-of-trauma>

The Language of Trauma and Loss  
<http://westernreservepublicmedia.org/trauma/>

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (2008). Child trauma toolkit for educators. Retrieved: [www.nctsn.net/assets/pdfs/Child\\_Trauma\\_Toolkit\\_Final.pdf](http://www.nctsn.net/assets/pdfs/Child_Trauma_Toolkit_Final.pdf)

Activities to increase executive function skills  
<http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/activities-guide-enhancing-and-practicing-executive-function->

skills-with-children-from-infancy-to-  
adolescence/



Do you find this article to be a helpful resource? Visit [www.childcareexchange.com](http://www.childcareexchange.com) or call (800) 221-2864 for further information about this article and many other exceptional educator and trainer resources.