

CHAPTER Four

Guiding Principles for Teaching Children with Trauma

Although many educators feel that young children will outgrow the effects of trauma, this is a mistaken belief. Young children are both the most vulnerable of populations and the most deeply influenced by trauma (Nicholson, Perez, & Kurtz 2019).

Three-year-old Liam has never had trouble falling asleep during rest time. Even after wildfires forced his family to flee their home six weeks ago, Liam has slept well, hugging his stuffed penguin, Pablo, closely to his tummy. Lately though, Liam has become anxious as rest time approaches. His educator, Ms. Sherrow, shares her concern with Liam's mom: "It's almost like he is scared to fall asleep." Ms. Sherrow is observing that signs of trauma may lay dormant and suddenly appear well after the trauma itself has ended.

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Five-year-old Emma has never missed a day of school. At the home visit before kindergarten started, Emma's grandmother, with whom she lives, shared with her teacher, Ms. Garcia, that Emma had been sexually abused by a family member when she was 2 and 3 years old. Ms. Garcia is surprised that despite the severe trauma in her life, Emma never acts out in the classroom. In fact, she seems to be in her own world, often staring into space. Emma keeps to herself and never bothers anyone. What Ms. Garcia has not yet realized is that Emma's withdrawal and daydreaming are very much signs of trauma, too.

Experiences like Liam's and Emma's are not unique. Children are not immune to aftereffects from natural disasters, abuse, and other adverse experiences. As you've read in the previous chapters, trauma negatively affects children's developing brains and bodies and has the potential to cause lifelong damage.

However, over the last 20 years or so, much has been learned about trauma and how a healing-centered approach can help children recover from these negative experiences. Indeed, coupling your expertise with the support of colleagues, specialists, families, and community leaders has the potential to ensure that children are not doomed by their past.

In this chapter we offer foundational information on basic principles that can be used to inform and guide your interactions with children. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 will discuss how to use these approaches in your day-to-day teaching practice. The following principles offer overarching guidance on teaching children exposed to trauma.

Principle 1: Recognize that All Children Will Benefit from a Trauma-Informed Approach

TIC focuses on social and emotional supports to help children learn to self-calm, regulate their emotions, and focus on learning. It is rooted in relationships and trust and emphasizes safety, predictability, and consistency. These are important social and emotional supports for *every* young child, so using a trauma-informed approach serves everyone in your program. By supporting the development of skills such as executive function, making friends, problem solving, and empathy, you are readying every child you teach for learning and school success.

As noted in Chapter 1, you may not be certain whether a child has been affected by trauma or not. Not all instances of trauma are readily identifiable. Some children with ACEs may be known to you because the child welfare system is involved in their lives. However, some children with ACEs may never be known to you. While it is possible with parental permission to screen all children in your program for trauma and

then link the results to service delivery systems such as a multitiered system of support (MTSS), doing so is a debatable approach. As of 2016, only one in eight schools at every level in the United States was making use of universal screening (Eklund & Rossen 2016).

In this book, we do not recommend the use of universal screening by schools or programs. For one thing, screening can lead to embarrassment or shame. Being known as a child who receives special treatment sets one apart from one's peers. Since one of the primary goals of recovery is to normalize life for a child exposed to trauma, no child should feel less than normal because of what they have experienced in life. "The best approach is to make sure we provide trauma-sensitive learning environments for *all* children" (Cole et al. 2013, 9).

Even when educators are aware of specific children having experienced trauma, they cannot assume that they know the extent of the children's traumas or the underlying causes. Very often there is more to the story that hasn't been uncovered. As the Council for Professional Recognition (2019) cautions early childhood educators, "You don't need to know exactly what caused the trauma to be able to help. Instead of focusing on the specifics of a stressful situation, concentrate on the support you can give. Stick with what you see—the hurt, anger, and worry—instead of getting every detail of a child's story" (6).

Providing the same social and emotional supports to all children in your classroom or family child care program will help ensure that no child who has experienced trauma will slip through the cracks. And every child will be enriched by your sensitive asset-building teaching.

Principle 2: Use a Strengths-Based Approach to Teaching

A natural impulse for many educators is to assess what a child's problems are and then try to fix them. You may even wonder whether children so traumatized by their experiences can ever become healthy. Yet when working with children who have been frightened and disoriented by immigration experiences, beaten down by abuse, or depressed by loss, focusing on what's

wrong both makes the problems worse and tends to leave children disengaged (Lewis 2015). Instead of focusing on what a child is lacking, build on what the child knows and can do. Strengths-based teaching has educators help children assess what they do well and then use these strengths and talents to build and bridge knowledge. You do this by focusing on the following (Zacarian, Alvarez-Ortiz, & Haynes 2017b):

- › Identifying children's existing strengths
- › Honoring, valuing, and acknowledging these strengths
- › Helping students become aware of their strengths
- › Building instructional programming that boosts social ties and networks by drawing from children's strengths

Drawing on children's strengths and capacities builds resilience and helps them develop the skills, competencies, and confidence they need to become active learners and critical thinkers. It also leads to improved educational outcomes, more success, increased engagement, and even greater happiness (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Gурpal 2011; Ginwright 2018; SAMHSA 2014b; Zacarian, Alvarez-Ortiz, & Haynes 2017b). This doesn't mean that you deny the existence of barriers and challenges to the children's learning, but that you use your energy and attention to intentionally focus on children's assets.

You'll find that it doesn't take great effort to identify strengths in young children, even when trauma has left them with great challenges. So much growth and development take place during the preschool and kindergarten years that there is always some new strength and capacity that emerges: "You sang 'Itsy, Bitsy Spider' all by yourself, Anyah! Maybe you and Keily would like to sing the song to all of us at our afternoon meeting."

Strengths-based teaching is especially well suited to children who have had trauma in their lives (Zacarian, Alvarez-Ortiz, & Haynes 2017a). It allows educators to focus on the whole child rather than the trauma or the child's behavior. This means looking at the child's personality, relationships, family and community values and beliefs, interests and dislikes, protective factors, support systems, and other capacities (Nicholson, Perez, & Kurtz 2019).

Proponents of a strengths-based approach envision children’s assets as being like individual tiles in a mosaic. Each strength may not stand out individually, but all the tiles taken together become a unified piece of art (Zacarian, Alvarez-Ortiz, & Haynes 2017a). As an educator, your mission is to take all a child’s individual tiles—or assets—and use them as a foundation for helping that child learn and succeed.

Principle 3: Recognize, Appreciate, and Address Differing Influences on Children’s Experiences with Trauma

Chapter 2 discussed some of the ways factors such as race, culture, language, socioeconomic status, disability, and gender influence the experience of trauma for children and how bias and discrimination in response to such aspects of children’s identities can be a source of trauma (Carter 2006; Hughes & Tucker 2018; Stevens 2015). A key part of individualizing your approach and making use of trauma-sensitive guidelines is to view children’s experiences through these lenses. While none of these influences predetermine a child’s response, they are an important part of the picture when determining how to best reach and teach individual children.

Here are some fundamental actions you can take as you seek to better understand the influences on individual children’s experience of trauma:

- › Get to know every family and child well. Understanding another person can strip away stereotypes and replace them with respect, understanding, and appreciation of differences as well as similarities. Do not assume that people who share a cultural or other identity have the same experiences or follow the same traditions. Knowing the specific country a family has emigrated from, for instance, is helpful in better understanding that family. Even more helpful is learning to know their individual experiences and practices.
- › Know yourself. Examine your own biases for preconceived notions and ways in which your own

background and experiences might influence how you interact with children and families. Reflect on the language (both spoken and body language) you use to make sure that you are not inflicting microaggressions (see Chapter 2). Videorecord yourself during children’s play and group times to study your responses to children to determine any biases you may be acting on.

- › Support children’s identities through books, music, toys and other materials, language, and cooking experiences that reflect the children, families, and their communities. Have dress-up clothes and props for dramatic play that are familiar to children, including open-ended pieces that can be used in multiple ways and items that are representative of their communities. Encourage children to have pride in who they are and to appreciate others for who they are.
- › Read aloud, discuss, and have children act out in skits and with puppets storybooks that deal with trauma through specific lenses such as race, culture, or gender. For example, *Ouch! Moments: When Words Are Used in Hurtful Ways* (by Michael Genhart) addresses racial microaggressions.
- › Work to forge a bond with each child, bearing in mind how factors like differences in home language, culture, and race may affect your interactions and the child’s responses. Designate one-on-one time every day.
- › Offer play experiences that children can participate in regardless of language. Art, sand and water play, and music are open-ended experiences where all children can express themselves.
- › Connect with community groups that serve migrant and refugee families for ongoing support, ideas, and knowledge of how to better serve families in their home languages.
- › For children with disabilities or developmental delays, who often need predictability to be successful, avoid changes to the daily routine and environment as much as possible to alleviate the stress that children often experience following trauma (CDC 2019). Offer soothing sensory techniques such as drawing, deep breathing, mindfulness, yoga, or exercising to manage emotions. As described in Principles 5

and 6, focus on building children’s self-regulation skills, not just working to reduce challenging behaviors (Rossen 2018).

- › While children display a variety of reactions to trauma, keep in mind that there are gender differences in children’s reactions to trauma and their resilience. In general, girls experience depression and anxiety following trauma, while boys show more anger and act aggressively (Epstein & Gonzalez, n.d; Foster, Kuperminc, & Price 2004). Mindfulness is an important strategy for helping children regardless of gender develop needed self-regulation. See Chapter 6 for more on mindfulness.
- › Perhaps most important, be an advocate for all children and families, particularly those whose experience of trauma may be affected by the factors discussed here. Chapter 8 suggests several ways you can do this.

Principle 4: Embrace Resilience as a Goal for Every Child

As an educator, you want many things for children: to master the goals in the curriculum; to develop a love of learning and a sense of curiosity; to be creative; to think critically; to appreciate the arts; to be kind and empathic; to make responsible decisions and solve problems; to feel capable, competent, and confident; to be able to reach their full potential; and to feel optimistic about themselves, others, and the world they live in. Touching on all these goals is a desire for children to be resilient—to be able to overcome whatever adversities they have been exposed to so they can learn and reach their full potential. It’s important that even children who have not been exposed to trauma be resilient so that they are prepared for whatever challenges life throws their way.

Culture is among the factors that influence children’s resilience, and it has a strong influence on both a child’s reaction to trauma and recovery from it (Raghavan & Sandanapitchai 2019). Clauss-Ehlers (2004) uses the term “cultural resilience” to express how cultural values, language, customs, and norms can be used to fortify oneself against adversity.

Examining the cultural supports that work as protective factors in creating children’s resilience will help you focus on what builds resilience rather than what chips away at it.

In addition to cultural supports that encourage the development of resilience, some children are more resilient than others due to temperament and factors such as caregiver–infant attachment. But for the most part, children’s resilience skills need to be nurtured and supported. As trauma pioneer Bruce Perry reminds us, “Resilient children are made, not born” (Grogan 2013).

The good news is that the number one way of fostering resilience in children is also the number one activity you should be doing anyway. According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University (n.d. c), “The single most common factor for children who develop resilience is at least one stable and committed relationship with a supportive parent, caregiver, or other adult.” You can be that person for the children in your program. Chapter 6 delves into building relationships with children.

In addition to forming a strong positive relationship with children, teachers can help children develop these critical skills to boost their resilience (Pearson & Hall 2017; Reivich & Shatté 2002):

1. Emotional regulation—the ability to keep emotions in check and not be overwhelmed by feelings
2. Impulse control—the ability to stop and choose whether to act on a desire to do something or to delay gratification
3. Causal analysis—the ability to analyze and accurately decide what caused the problem being faced
4. Realistic optimism—the ability to maintain a positive thinking style without ignoring real-life constraints
5. Empathy—the ability to understand the feelings and needs of others
6. Self-efficacy—the belief in one’s own abilities to succeed and make a difference in the world
7. Reaching out—the ability to learn from mistakes and take on new opportunities