

The Impact of Childhood Trauma

Early Childhood Collaborative of Southington

Carol O'Connor, LCSW
Senior Project Coordinator
CHDI

Why Trauma and You?

Before diving into more explicit discussions around trauma, it is important to acknowledge that this can be difficult. Everyone has their own histories and life experiences that influence how they take in, handle, and process certain topics.

Please keep this in mind in your work with children and families.

Why Trauma and You?

This is a tough topic, but we need to talk about it, need to get comfortable with it

- Talking about trauma helps families to understand the impact that traumatic events have had on them
- Talking about trauma lets families know that it is safe for them to discuss trauma with you
- This is important to your work because some families are already dealing with the impact of traumatic events on their lives
- You have a very unique role because of the relationships you have developed with families
- Each family faces multiple stressors and has different resilience and coping strategies

How We Think of Trauma?

What happened to this family?

vs.

What is wrong with this family?

Strength and Resilience

Trauma Lens

This is an idea that we will return to, but is a shift that we make to do trauma informed work

What is trauma?

Let's think about trauma

What do you think of when we are talking about trauma?

How do you define trauma?

Defining trauma

Here's our working definition of trauma:

Trauma results from an **event, series of events, or set of circumstances** that is experienced by an individual as **physically and emotionally harmful or threatening** and that **has lasting adverse effects** on the individual's physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. (SAMSHA, 2012)

The experience is

Overwhelming

Changes our thoughts

Reduces our sense of control/ safety

Potential Traumatic Events

- Physical Abuse
- Sexual Abuse
- Domestic Violence
- Dating Violence
- Community violence and victimization
- Painful medical procedures
- Sudden separation from caregiver
- Traumatic death of loved one
- Serious Car or other accidents
- Fires
- Natural disasters
- War/ terrorism
- Refugee/ immigration
- Housing instability

Are there others that we should consider?

Prevalence of Trauma

Approximately, 26% of children in US witness or experience a trauma by the age of 4

Victims of abuse & neglect:

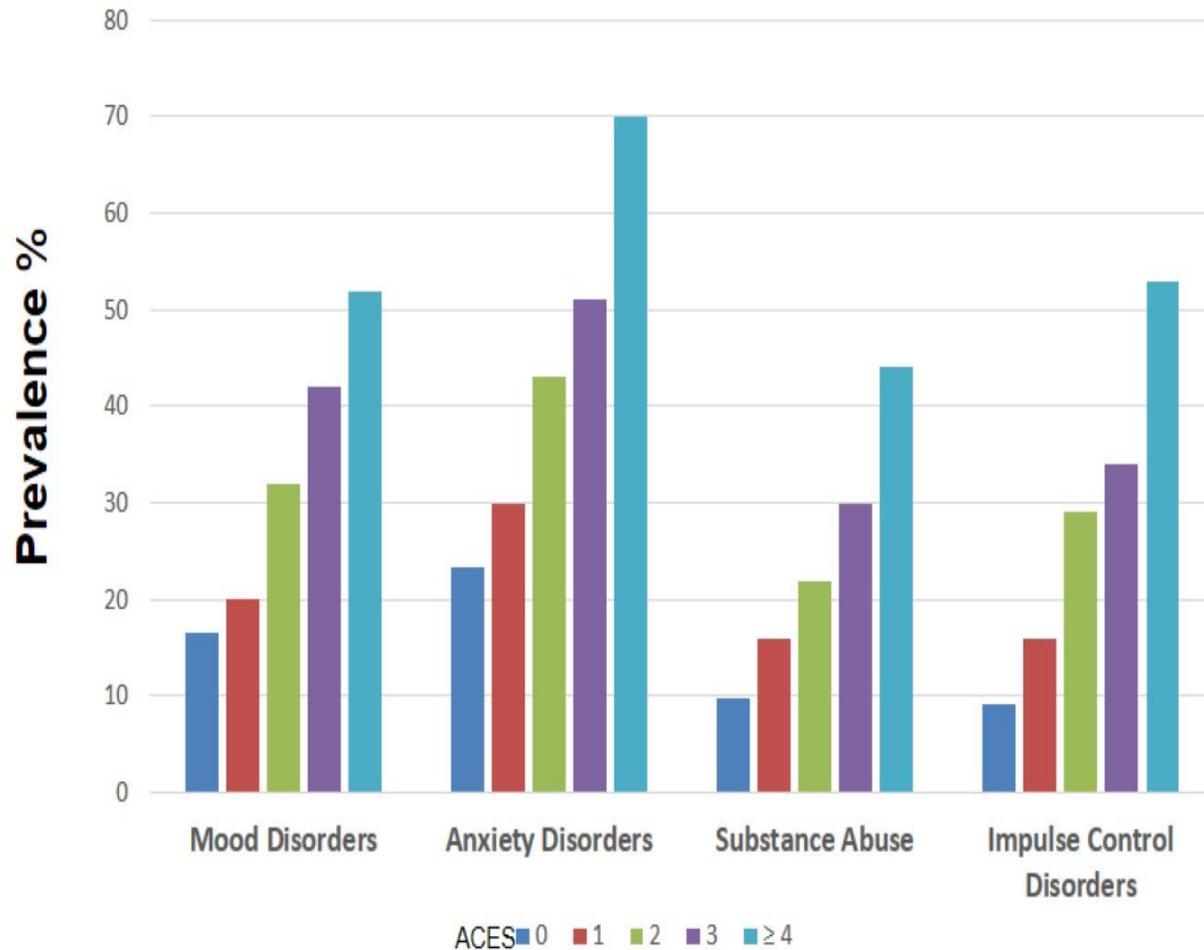
- 26.8% are under the age of 3
- 19.9% are 3-5 years old

Given these numbers, we are encountering many families and children who have experienced trauma

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study

- The Adverse Childhood Experiences study – otherwise known as the “ACE” study is a now 14 year collaboration between the CDC and Kaiser Permanente in San Diego. It the largest study of its kind ever done. Over **17,000** HMO Members – were interviewed and answered a series of questions about their childhood experiences
- The purpose of this study was to look at the possible health and social effects of adverse childhood experiences over the lifespan.
- Looked at the relationship between 10 ACEs in childhood and health outcomes in adulthood
- The findings are groundbreaking, have vast public health implications, and are being discussed all over the world today

Cumulative ACES & Mental Health^{1,2}

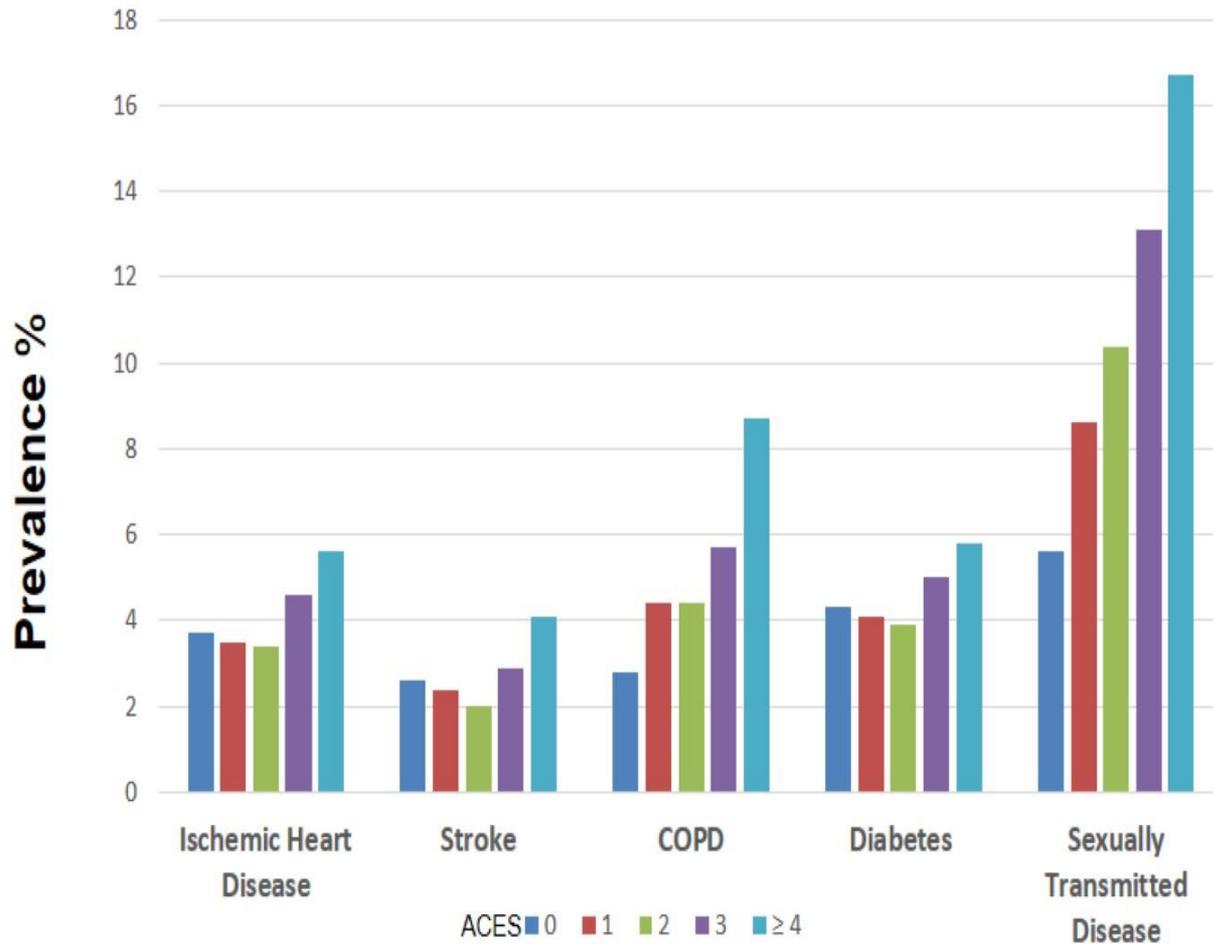


¹Data from the National Comorbidity Survey-Replication Sample (NCS-R).

²Putnam, Harris, Putnam, J Traumatic Stress, 26:435-442, 2013.

³McLaughlin et al (2012). Archives General Psychiatry
CANarratives.org

Cumulative ACES & Chronic Disease¹



What does trauma look like for kids?

- **Myth**: Young children aren't affected because they were too young to understand/don't talk about it
- There is a big range of responses to trauma
- Reaction to situation doesn't make sense except through trauma lens
- Regression (lose skills) – behavior, emotions, verbal skills
- May threaten belief that caregivers/adults can keep them safe (and won't hurt them)
- Examples:
 - Hyperarousal
 - Avoidance
 - Intrusive thoughts
 - Re experiencing
 - Altered Threat Perception

What Happens?

- Loss of control (Structure and Routines)
- Avoidance
- Fight Flight Freeze
- Brain Alarm System
- Cumulative Effects
- Sensory Interpretation of the Environment
- Reminders
- Reactions

Trauma Reminders

We all (including infants and young children) interpret our environment through our senses:

- What do I see?
- What do I hear?
- What do I smell?
- What do I feel?
- What do I taste?

These sensory reminders may seem harmless, but may activate “Automatic survival mode” in the brain

A child or parent may not be aware of their sensory cues

Trauma Reminders

Sensory

- Yelling/ loud noises
- Being touched/ people too close (especially strangers)
- When caregivers appear angry/ irritated
- Physical resemblance to abuser

Feeling vulnerable

- Being threatened
- Harsh discipline
- Separated from loved one/ isolated

Life transitions/holidays/anniversaries that impact the family

What Kids Say...

- “I could tell by the sound of the key in the lock that things were going to be bad. Now, I still listen for that sound.”
- “I could see the color of his eyes and whenever I see eyes that are that color, I feel like I need to fight to get away.”
- “The room was very cold. If I am in a cold room, I need to leave.”
- “My body was squished up under the table.” Now, I’m afraid of being in tight spaces.”
- “I could smell the mouthwash and if I smell mouthwash now, I think I’m going to pass out.”

Reminders > Reactions

Harmless reminders that may activate Automatic survival mode

Trauma reminders may cause a reaction that doesn't make sense except when viewed through a trauma lens

Trauma reminders may explain a sudden or extreme behavior response

Trauma reminders may result in flashbacks, a loss of control or emotional dysregulation

Requires calm/patience/support to return child to typical thinking mode

Share the Good News!

- Children and families are resilient
- Children and families can learn to recognize their trauma reminders and develop coping skills to deal with them
- Providing information about trauma:
 - lets families know it's ok to talk with you about trauma
 - reduces their sense of isolation and stigma
 - helps families make the connection between what happened to them and how they are functioning

Trauma Impact



Trauma Impact

What Happens?

- Acute response (Flight, Fright, Freeze)
- Alarm system
- False Alarms
- Trauma often impacts the parent and other family members, too
 - Child impact
 - Family impact
 - Multi generational trauma impact
 - Community impact
- Impact of parent trauma history on parenting

Trauma Impact on Early Child Development

- Children prioritize skills and competencies that help them survive and meet their safety and security needs
- Hierachy of needs
- These skills are associated with developmental stages
- If the child needs to be focused on survival needs, this takes energy away from developmental tasks

Safe

Focused on daily activities

Breathing/heart rate normal

Range of feelings

Feel in control

Alert/aware

Sense of reality

Ready to learn

Connected to others

Thinking/planning ahead



Threat

Focused on survival

Thinking impaired

↑↑ Breathing/heart rate

Feeling Fear/Terror

Loss of control

Hypervigilant

Reality confusion

Not ready to learn

Disconnected





False Alarm

Focused on survival

Thinking impaired

↑↑ Breathing/heart rate

Feeling Fear/Terror

Loss of control

Hypervigilant

Reality confusion

Not ready to learn

Disconnected



More Good News

There are things you can do
to help

Prevention & treatment work

Trauma informed systems exist

Posttraumatic growth is possible



NCTSN

12 Core Concepts of Trauma

1. Traumatic experiences are inherently complex
2. Trauma occurs within a broad context
3. Traumatic events often generate 2ndary adversities
4. Children can exhibit a wide range of reactions to trauma and loss
5. Danger and safety are core concerns in the lives of traumatized children
6. Traumatic experiences affect the family and broader caregiver systems
7. Protective and promotive factors can reduce the adverse impact of trauma
8. Trauma and posttrauma adversities can strongly influence development
9. Developmental neurobiology underlies children's reactions to traumatic experiences
10. Culture is closely interwoven with traumatic experiences, response and recovery
11. Challenges to the social contract, including legal and ethical issues, affect trauma response and recovery
12. Working with trauma-exposed children can evoke distress in providers that makes it more difficult for them to provide good care.

What Can We Do?

- Use a trauma lens
- Talk trauma
- Observe the environment
- Intervene early
- Focus on resilience/protective factors
- Develop strategies/ activities (ways to respond, identifying feelings, etc.)
- Create routines- Help family create safe, predictable environment
- Support a stable nurturing parent
- Understand relationship between child, family members and community

Use a Trauma Lens

- Avoidance is a hallmark of trauma (talk about it)
- Talk about trauma in relation to feelings – “things that make us feel scared”
- Understand the behavior: “What happened to you?” and not “What’s wrong with you?”
- Listen, discuss feelings, use soothing strategies
- Think safety
- Talk about trauma impact and generational trauma



Think Trauma

- What happened to this family vs. what's wrong with this family?
- Family is focused on survival needs
- Behaviors meet their survival needs
- Understanding why structure, predictability and building routines are so important
- Understanding why sense of control is so important
- Role of crisis in a family
- Partnering with a family, building trust

Talking to Families

- How will you discuss trauma with a family?
- What are their traumatic experiences?
- What are this family's possible trauma reminders?
- What are the trauma reactions?
- How do you know it's trauma, what else might look similar?
- Use the NCTSN one page handout (see the resources) to explain trauma to parents

Strategies

- Personalize
- Use the 5 senses
- Understand the connection between trauma reminders and behavior/ reactions
- Engagement- strength based
- Establish healthy routines
- Use tiny pieces
- Structure
- Predictability
- Turn down the volume
- Talk about upsetting feelings
- Recognize when child is experiencing trauma reminders
- Understanding emotions, intensity, regulation, change the channel

Strategies

Breathing Activities

- Smell the flowers, blow out the candles

Movement Activities

- Stretching

Grounding Activities

- Balancing, yoga

Muscle Relaxation

- Where do you feel the tension

Emotional expression/ regulation skills

- Feelings Faces

Use books, stories

How can you use these in your role as a provider or caregiver?

Build Routines

- Establish predictability so that modulation and safety are felt
- Consider modulation in creation of routines
- Target areas of challenge and predict the natural pitfalls
- Tune In- “I wonder if we tried...”; “Would you help me test this out?”
- Create Comfort Zones
- Helping child/ family build a Toolbox
- BE REALISTIC

Making Connections

Referral for further support may be needed if:

- There is serious/ significant trauma,
- Continued challenging behaviors, developmental concerns,
- Parent needs their own support,
- There are known additional traumas,
- Parent needs help or requests help

Identify the “next steps” or local resources available if a child/ family needs further support

Know the potential resources available in your community

ID barriers (concrete and perceptual) to the family seeking additional treatment

Taking Care of Ourselves

“There is a cost to caring.” – Charles Figley

- 2ndary trauma is real
- Impacted by our own trauma history
- Impact on our work
- Strategies- What can you do?
 - Pull your shoulders down
 - BREATHE
 - Visualization, think of favorite place
 - Talk with peer/ supervisor
 - Predict “ I may need to talk with you after this visit, can I reach you?”

Taking Care of Ourselves

Develop Your Toolbox:

Strategies for taking care of myself at work

- what do we do now?
- what works for you?

Strategies for taking care of myself at home

- what do we do now?
- what works for you?



Resources

NCTSN:

nctsn.org/resources

ACES Study:

<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/index.html>

CT Resources/ Find a provider:

CHDI.org

KidsMentalHealthInfo.com

211

DCF ARGs

National Child Traumatic Stress Network (www.nctsn.org)

The screenshot shows the NCTSN website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with links for Home, Trauma Types, Resources, About Us, Treatments That Work, and Products. A search bar is located on the right. Below the navigation bar, there is a sidebar on the left with a 'Resources' menu. The main content area is titled 'Resources for School Personnel' and features a large graphic of a school building with a sign that reads 'NCTSN For School Personnel' and 'One out of every 4 children attending school has been exposed to a traumatic event that can affect learning and/or behavior. Help is available. Hope is possible!'. There is also a smaller sign that says 'Has there been a Crisis situation at your school? Click here.' Below the graphic, there are four resource boxes: 'Child Trauma: A Toolkit for Educators' (Available in English and Spanish), 'Psychological First Aid: For Schools - A Complete Manual', 'School Resources for School Personnel' (By Teachers For Teachers), and 'Other Network Resources for Educators on Child Trauma' (Information, Knowledge & Tools).

The banner features the NCTSN logo with '15 YEARS' and 'The National Child Traumatic Stress Network' text. To the right, it says 'NCTSN LEARNING CENTER'.

THE LEARNING CENTER

FREE Online Education

As part of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network Center, the Learning Center for Child and Adolescent Trauma offers Free Online Education with:

 300+ FREE CE certificates

 50+ speakers

 200+ online webinars

 90,000+ members

THE STARFISH STORY

One day a man was walking along the beach when he noticed a boy picking up and gently throwing things into the ocean.

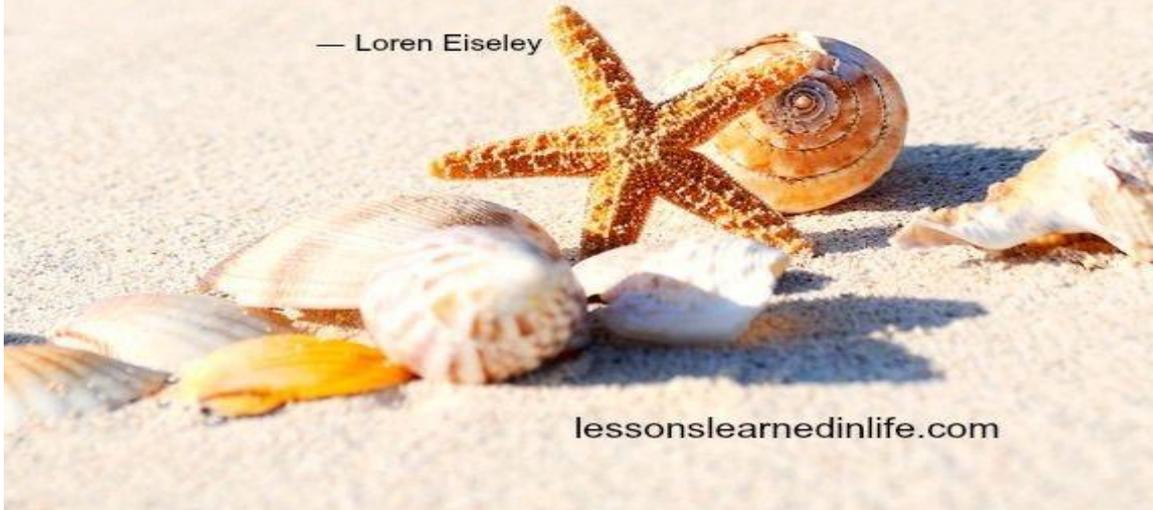
Approaching the boy he asked: "Young man, what are you doing?"

The boy replied, "Throwing starfish back into the ocean. The surf is up and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them back, they'll die."

The man laughed to himself and said, "Do you realize there are miles of miles of beach and hundreds of starfish?" "You can't make any difference."

After listening politely, the boy bent down, picked up another starfish and threw it into the surf, then smiling at the man, he said;
"I made a difference to that one."

— Loren Eiseley



lessonslearnedinlife.com

Where Do We Go From Here?

Becoming A Trauma Informed Community