

TRAUMA, BEHAVIOR, AND THE HEALING POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS

First Things First Early Childhood Summit 2019

Abstract

Childhood traumatic experiences have lifelong neurobiological consequences that affect the ways in which children perceive themselves and the world around them. Children who have experienced trauma cannot learn unless they feel safe in their learning environment.

Felt safety comes through the establishment of relational connections with consistent, supportive, and caring adults in the child's life. This presentation draws upon the latest research on the educational implications of affective neuroscience focusing on the impact of trauma on the child's stress-response system and the important role that teachers play in building relationships that foster security and create a neurological climate in which behavioral self-regulation and learning can occur.

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Trauma, Behavior, and the Healing Power of Relationships

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1. An estimated 20 - 25% of American youth between the ages of 5 to 18 have significant emotional or behavioral health disorders.
2. It Starts Early
 - a. The median age of onset:
 - i. Anxiety Disorders (6 years)
 - ii. Behavior (11 years)
 - iii. Mood (13 years)
 - iv. Substance Use Disorders (15 years)
3. Campbell (1995) estimated that approximately 10-15% of all typically developing preschool children have chronic mild to moderate levels of behavior problems.
4. Preschool children are three times more likely to be “expelled” than children in grades K-12 (Gilliam, 2005)
5. Children who are identified as hard to manage at ages 3 and 4 have a high probability (50:50) of continuing to have difficulties into adolescence. (Campbell & Ewing, 1990; Campbell, 1997; Egeland et al., 1990).
6. Why?
 - a. Stressful and Traumatic Life Events
7. Sources of Toxic Stress in Young Children (U.S. Children Ages 0-5, Per Thousand)

a. Substantiated Cases of Abuse	40
b. Maltreatment	75
c. Substance Abuse	98
d. Maternal Depression	130
e. Partner Violence	210

8. Adverse Childhood Experiences Study

- a. Large epidemiological study of 17,300 adults
- b. Matched childhood experiences with adult health
- c. Defined 10 categories, each valued at 1
- d. Does not score events, just categories

9. Some Ace Questions

- a. Before the age of 18:
 - i. Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic or who used street drugs?
 - ii. Were your parents ever separated or divorced?
 - iii. Did a parent or other adult in the household often or very often...push, grab, slap, or throw something at you or ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?
 - iv. Did you often or very often feel that ... no one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special? Or your family didn't look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?

10. Adverse Childhood Experiences Study

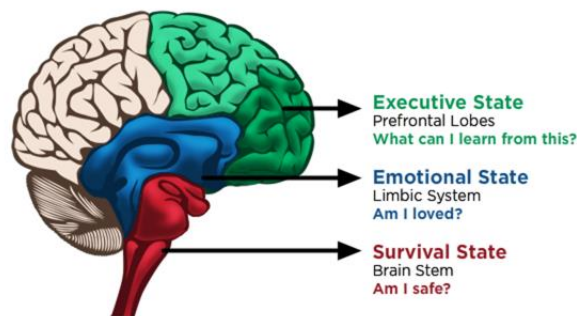
- a. Abuse
 - i. Psychological
 - ii. Physical Abuse
 - iii. Sexual Abuse
- b. Neglect
 - i. Emotional
 - ii. Physical
- c. House Dysfunction
 - i. Substance Abuse
 - ii. Parental Separation/Divorce
 - iii. Depression/mental illness
 - iv. Battered Mother
 - v. Family member imprisoned

11. ACE Results

- a. With a score of 4 or more
 - i. 513% increase in depression
 - ii. 1,296% more likely to be removed from home
 - iii. 1,220% increase in attempted suicide
 - iv. 740% increase in alcoholism
 - v. 470% increase in illicit drug use
 - vi. 311% increase in chronic bronchitis/emphysema
 - vii. 220% increase in severe obesity
 - viii. 150% increase in ischemic heart disease
 - ix. 1,666% more likely to have learning or behavior problems in school.

12. The Relationship Between Trauma and Behavior and Learning

- a. Emotional States Dictate Behavior
- b. Brain States



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- c. Problem solving requires self-regulation
- d. "As long as people are either hyper-aroused or shut down, they cannot learn from experience." Van Der Kolk, B. (2014). *The Body Keeps the Score*, p.205

13. How does trauma affect our ability to self-regulate?

14. Right Brain Development

- a. Begins in the 3rd trimester and continues for 1000 days.
- b. Center for:
 - i. Empathy
 - ii. Connection
 - iii. Mirror neurons
- c. We communicate right brain to right brain through:
 - i. Voice, Facial expression, and Body language
 - ii. Maternal care shapes the stress-regulating HPA axis

15. The Chameleon Effect

- a. Nonconscious mimicry of others' postures and gestures creates affiliation, rapport, and liking.

16. Our internal emotional state is influenced by the emotional state of others.

- a. Human emotions are highly contagious...

17. Emotions make individuals to feel, act, and view the world in a similar fashion

- a. Children not only recognize the emotional state of their teachers, they match it.
- b. The adult and the child regulate their behaviors together.

18. Not all emotions are contagious.

- a. Stressful Emotions are Contagious

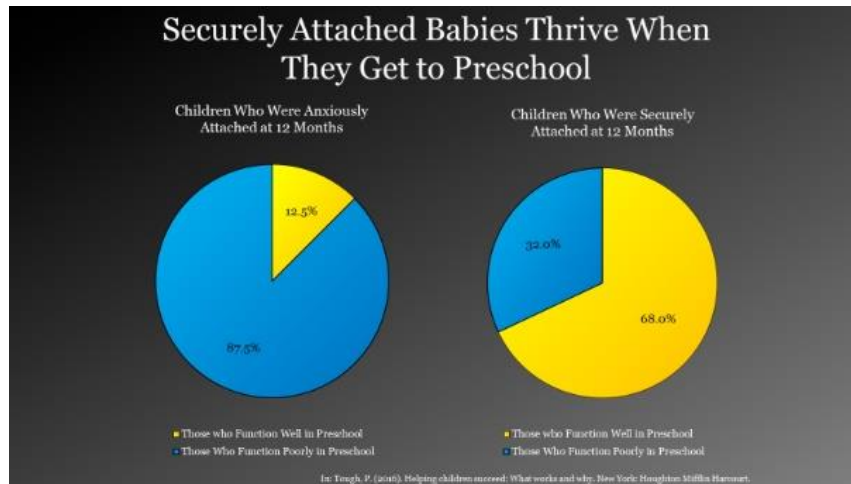
Stressful Mental State	Relaxed Mental State
Anger	Creativity
Fear	Compassion
Tension	Self-Control
Nervousness	Kindness
Anxiety	Natural Happiness
Hypervigilance	
Depression	

- 19. "Learning is both a cognitive and an emotional process...To learn, students empathically recognize the teacher's actions, thoughts and goals" (Helen Immordino-Yang).

- a. “Emotions are, in essence, the rudder that steers thinking” (Immordino-Yang).
- b. Children interpret those perceptions through the lens of their own experience.

20. Early Intervention

- a. Children who participated in high quality, developmentally appropriate early intervention programs scored at the 76th percentile.
- b. Securely Attached Babies Thrive When They Get to Preschool



21. Insecure Attachment

- c. The absence of connectedness
 - i. “the same symptoms in children who’d been deprived of their mothers –the superficial relationships, the poverty of feeling for others, the inaccessibility, the lack of emotional response, the often pointless deceitfulness and theft, and the inability to concentrate in school”

22. Why is that?

23. “Neurons that fire together, wire together, and survive together.” (Allan Schore)

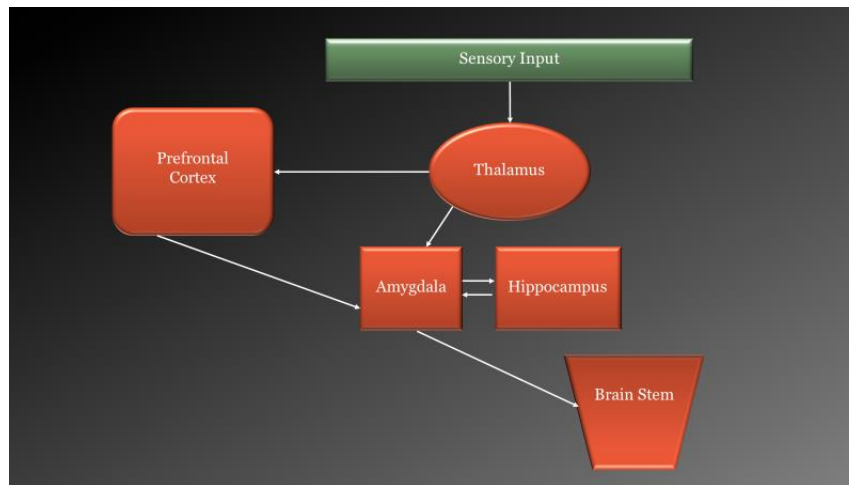
24. If the Adult Caregiver is not Available, Safe, or Trustworthy

- a. Lack of exposure to a caring, trustworthy adult
 - ii. Less time in interactions results in the development of:
 - 1. Less empathy
 - 2. Less trust

3. Less opportunity to care and connect through gene activation.

25. The brain seeks patterns

a. Mental Models

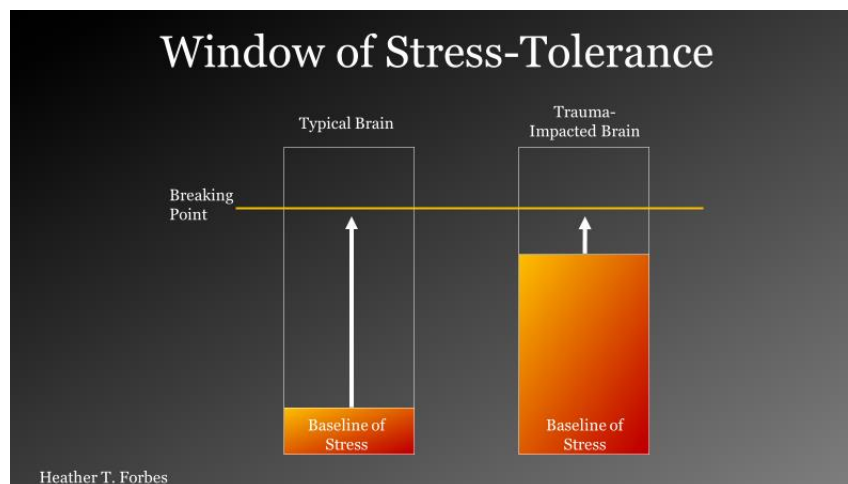


26. “The most significant consequence of early relational trauma is the loss of the ability to regulate the intensity and duration of affects.” Allan Schore

27. Elevated stress hormones with no all clear signal.

a. “The stress hormones of traumatized people ... take much longer to return to baseline and spike quickly and disproportionately in response to mildly stressful stimuli.” (Bessel Van Der Kolk)

28. Window of Stress Tolerance



29. “The initial problem behavior rarely lands a student in the office.” (James Moffett)

- a. “In most cases, it’s the teacher’s reaction to the initial behavior that escalates the student and causes more escalated behaviors. Many times, the reaction of a staff member turns a minor behavior into a major behavior.” (James Moffett)

30. What is it for you that flips your lid?

31. “Conflict often happens at the intersection of two people’s histories.” (Karyn Purvis)

32. “When our little people are overwhelmed by big emotions, it’s our job to share our calm, not join in their chaos.” (L.R. Knost)

33. Self-Regulation

- a. As adults, we cannot take others any higher than we are ourselves.
- b. Any strategy that does not start with adult self-regulation is doomed.

34. The antidote to a stressful mental state is the presence of a caring and supportive adult.

- a. “Relationships are the agents of change and the most powerful therapy is human love.” (Dr. Bruce Perry).
- b. Children in classrooms characterized by teachers who they believed truly cared for them scored at the 76th percentile.
- c. “A protective factor against disruptive school experiences is whether the child ... connects with someone that they believe truly cares about them.”
- d. "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." (Maya Angelou)

35. Connections

a. Neurobiology of Connection

1. Create Neural Connections between:

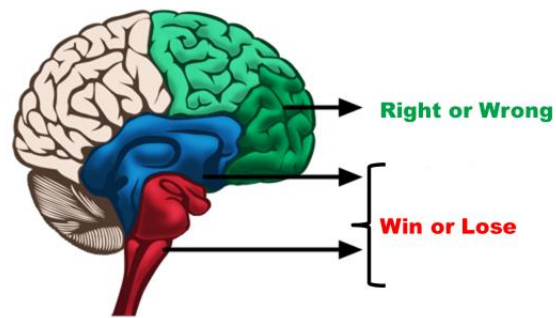
- a. Dopamine (feel good)
- b. Endorphins (pleasure)
- c. Oxytocin (human connection and bonding)

36. Connection = Cooperation

- a. The motivation to behave comes from being in a relationship.
- b. Connection wires the brain for attention, impulse control, and willingness.
- c. Learning requires an emotional connection as well as effective strategies

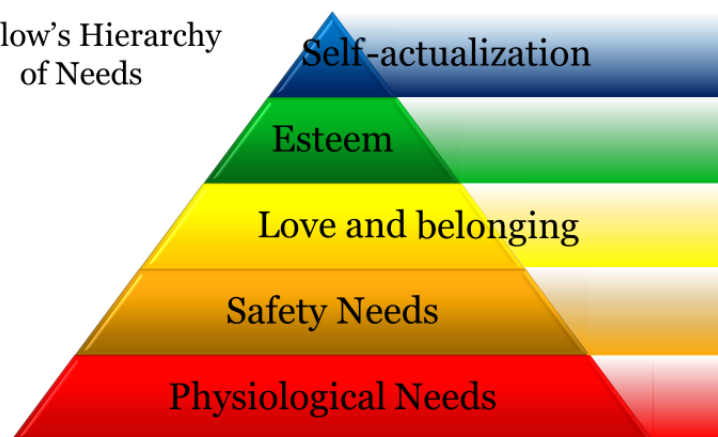
37. How Do We Connect?

- a. To change the brain structure and develop new neurons, the matter of frequency, intensity, and the use of repetition is key.
 - b. “The human brain is talked into talking and loved into loving.” (Hardwired to Connect)
 - c. Connection Creates a Biochemistry that Optimizes the Function of Our Brain
 - d. Ingredients for Connection:
 - i. Eye Contact
 - a. Get down on eye level.
 - b. The eyes contain nerve projections that lead directly to key brain structures for empathy and matching emotions
 - ii. Touch
 - a. Touch is the only sense that we cannot live without. The skin is the “outside layer” of the brain. Touch creates a hormone that is essential to neural function and learning.
 - iii. Presence
 - a. Being present in the moment means your mind and body are in the same place. You are still enough to see the beauty in the child. Presence is about acceptance.
 - iv. Playful Situation
 - a. Playfulness builds bonds by releasing dopamine. Dopamine says, “Pay attention! Stay focused!” Playful situations strengthen the dopamine system, increase attention span and boost social development.
38. Truly effective trauma-responsive schools are more focused on relationships than they are academics.
- a. “No one cares how much you know until they know how much you care.” (Theodore Roosevelt)
39. Rules and structure without relationships can trigger the very behaviors that we are hoping to eliminate.



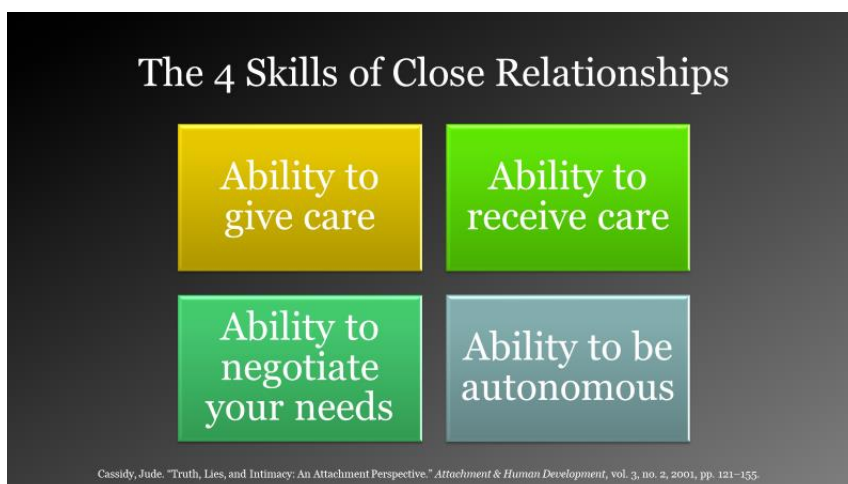
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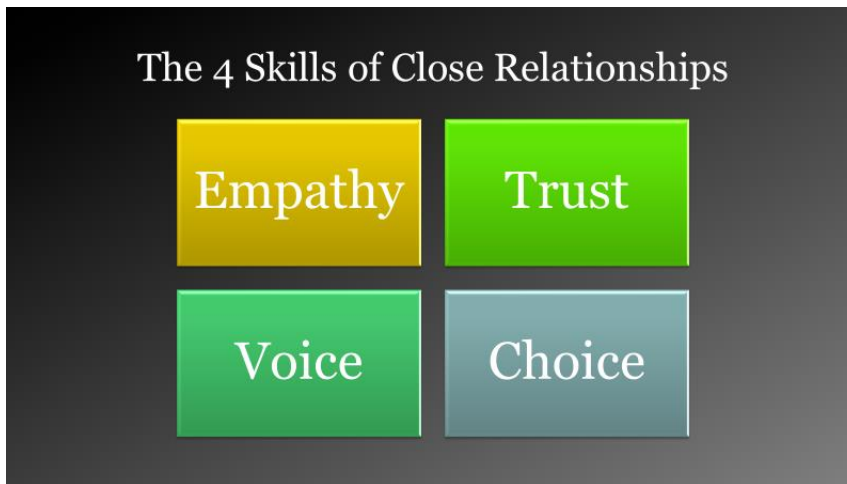
Maslow's Hierarchy
of Needs



40. Truly effective schools are relationship first campuses.

41. The 4 Skills of Close Relationships





42. Building Connections Must Be Intentional

- a. Positive student-teacher relationships are not a strategy—they are the result of who you are.

43. The impact of trauma is intergenerational.

- a. We know what works.
- b. The Kauai Study
 - i. Followed 698 children from unstable homes for 40 years.
 - ii. Two-thirds grew up to experience difficulties with delinquency, mental and physical health problems and family instability.
 - iii. One-third developed into caring, competent and confident adults.
 - iv. Common Protective Factors
 - 1. Strong bond with a nonparent caretaker (i.e. aunt, babysitter, teacher).
 - 2. Made to believe that they were an appealing child.
 - 3. Strong involvement in church or community groups.

44. Children who need the most love, ask for it in the most unloving ways.

45. That child who is the most challenging...Just remember...that is not who they are...that is who they have become.

46. Our biology does not have to become our biography.

47. The New 3 R's (Daniel Siegel):

- a. Reflection + Relationships = Resilience

48. Who you are makes the difference.