

# Trauma and the Family System

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# Trauma

- Acute, chronic, and complex
- Impact determined by numerous factors
- Assess carefully – both the individual and the system
- Multi-modal approach to treatment



# Mediating factors

- Age
- Ability
- Environment – exposure to other stressors
- Resources
- Family relationships
- Culture
- Temperament
- Resiliency
- Severity
- Duration



# Impact on caregivers and family members

- Helplessness
- Frustration
- Exhaustion
- Loss
- Own trauma



# Assessment

- Critical in process
  - Understand behaviors and underlying causes
  - Highlight abilities and strengths
  - Define a baseline level of functioning
- Family assessment is crucial
- Comprehensive and inclusive
- Helps guide treatment



# Methods

- Interviews – parents, children, teachers/ caregivers
- Observations – child play, family interactions
- Standardized measures (ex. Child Behavior Checklist, Trauma Symptom Checklist for Children)
- Other records – system involvement (school reports, medical records, DSS records)



# Child Assessment

## Parent/Child Interview

- Subjective experience
- Meaning / understanding / disclosure
- Impact on functioning
- Assess current needs

## Developmental history

- Early childhood experiences
- Milestones

## Current level of developmental functioning

- Developmental age
- Cognitive ability
- Verbal ability



# Family & Relationship Assessment

- Parental exposure to trauma
- Parental response to the trauma
- Current environmental stressors
- Secure relationships
- Attunement
- Parental use of alcohol/ substances



# Strengths

- In system
- In relationships
- In self – esteem, ability, coping
- Environment and resources



# Differential Diagnoses

- Behaviors/symptoms look the same:
  - Anxiety
  - Attention deficit/hyperactivity
  - Depression
  - Oppositional Defiance/ Conduct Disorder
  - Bipolar



# Treatment

- SAFETY MUST BE ESTABLISHED
- SEEK OR BUILD HEALTHY SUPPORTS/  
RELATIONSHIPS
- THERAPEUTIC ENVIRONMENT MUST BE SAFE,  
CALMING
- PRIMARY CONCERN:
  - Must have stable, predictable environment



# Goals for therapy

- 1) Establish safety
- 2) Self-regulation
- 3) Understanding the trauma
- 4) Enhancing relationships
- 5) Experience positive affect



# METHODS

- Family Therapy
- Expressive Therapies (Art, Music, Sandplay)
- Narrative Therapy
- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy
- Biofeedback
- EMDR



# Family Therapy

- Psychoeducation
  - Help parents understand trauma
  - Difference in parenting a child with attachment difficulties
  - Help parents see child's emotional age
  - Realistic expectations
- Family Therapy
  - Practice attachment behaviors – holding, cuddling, “staring contests”
  - Increase attunement & communication
  - Build and enhance relationships
  - Filial Therapy, Theraplay



# Cognitive Behavior Therapy

- Teaching stress management and relaxation skills
- Talking about trauma and feelings in a non-threatening way (safety, pacing)
- Create a trauma narrative
- “Correct” distorted beliefs about trauma
- Shift inaccurate views (guilt & shame)
- Involve parents – “practice” at home



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# Online Resources

- Child Trauma Academy [www.childtrauma.org](http://www.childtrauma.org)
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network [www.nctsnet.org](http://www.nctsnet.org)
- National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children  
[www.starrtraining.org/tlc](http://www.starrtraining.org/tlc)
- Trauma Center at the Justice Resource Institute  
[www.traumacenter.org](http://www.traumacenter.org)
- Trauma-focused Cognitive Behavior Therapy: TF-CBT  
[www.tfcbt.musc.edu](http://www.tfcbt.musc.edu)