Separation, Grief, and Trauma: Supporting Babies, Toddlers and Their Families

Final Integrative Project

- Presentation at Wisconsin Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Conference, June 13-14, 2016
- PowerPoint with training notes and activity notes for use by cohort to share widely

We Will Be Discussing:

- Implications of trauma, grief, and loss for very young children, highlighting the context of military-connected families
- The importance of a trauma-informed approach
- Strategies for promoting resilience during stressful, challenging times
- Resources designed to support interdisciplinary professionals serving military-connected families

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Trauma

When a person experiences an intense event that threatens or causes harm to their emotional or physical well-being.
- A trauma is an intense event that threatens a person’s life or safety in a way that is too much for the mind to handle and leaves the person impacted.
- Trauma can have a long-term impact on both physical, emotional and social health.

What is Trauma-Informed Practice?

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network describes characteristics of trauma-informed practice:
- **Identify**: Ability to identify trauma exposure and related symptoms
- **Provide Information to Parents**: Make information available to parents on trauma exposure, it’s impact, it’s prevention and it’s intervention
- **Provide Support to Families**: Provide support to strengthen resilience and protective factors of children and families impacted by trauma
- **Refer**: Refer families to evidence-based treatment services when needed
- **Self-Care**: Understand the self-care that is needed when working with families impacted by trauma

A New Life Begins...
What Do Babies and Toddlers Need?

- What must every child have to grow, learn and flourish?

Infants & Toddlers’ Developmental Work

- Forming secure attachments
- Exploring their environments
- Working toward physical, emotional, and cognitive milestones
- Developing an emotional road map
- Learning to soothe and regulate themselves

Healthy Social-Emotional Development

- The young child’s capacity to....

  - Feel safe and secure enough to explore themselves, others and the world
  - Engage in increasingly interpersonal activities
  - Form loving and reciprocal relationships
  - Communicate in gesture, word, play and thought
Trauma for Infants and Toddlers

▶ What might this look like for a very young child?

The Impact of Stress

- Chronic Unrelenting Stress
- Tolerable Stress
- Normative Stress

A Reminder

▶ We must always be mindful that, in addition to what the event brings to the family, it is what the family brings to the event.

Every family is unique and will write its own story.
Growing Up Military

- Military life is often demanding
- Military has unique cultures that can vary by branch, installation, mission and family
- Military families have historically been remarkably resilient
- Today’s circumstances can be extraordinarily difficult

Infants and toddlers are affected by stress and trauma associated with deployments and homecomings, as well as injury and parental loss.

Emotional Cycle of Separation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage of Separation</th>
<th>Occurs</th>
<th>Infants/Toddlers May Experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Deployment</td>
<td>When family first made aware of pending separation</td>
<td>Anticipatory grief, sadness, anger, hurt, anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deployment</td>
<td>When parent leaves, usually lasts 4-6 weeks</td>
<td>Numbness, sadness, tearfulness, or possibly relief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainment</td>
<td>4-6 weeks after parent leaves until 4-6 weeks before the return of parent</td>
<td>Leveling of emotions, routines are established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-Deployment</td>
<td>Begins 4-6 weeks prior to parent’s return</td>
<td>Excited yet stressed over how any changes that have been made will be accepted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reintegration</td>
<td>Upon parents return</td>
<td>Honeymoon-like feelings that can turn stressful quickly as families re-establish roles and responsibilities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Imagine the Experience of a Child

Lullaby
By Chuck Mangione

Please somebody hold my hand
I’m scared and feel real shaky
Please somebody understand
I just now lost my daddy

Daddy said goodbye today
I miss him so already
I love mommy very much
But mommies can’t be daddies

Please somebody hold my hand
I’m scared and feel real shaky
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Saying good-bye to Daddy
For Your Consideration

Consider a family in your program
• What are their challenges?
• How does the family’s cultural context promote resilience?
How do you think complicated transitions might affect infants and toddlers and their core needs?

Parental Trauma, Grief or Loss

The parent/caregiver might, to some degree, be “emotionally” absent
► Emotionally preoccupied by the trauma, grief or loss.
► Less available time/capacity for positive play and interaction.
Changes in structure and routine
► Can represent further breakdown in security.
Caregiver/child relationship becomes more stressful
► Reduced “En face-à-face” opportunities

Ways Young Children May Respond to Loss

► Protest
► Sadness and emotional withdrawal
  • Withdrawal, lethargy, detachment
  • Concept of “short sadness span”
► Intensification of normative developmental anxieties
► Anger
► Regressions in developmental functioning
Injury

The parent is changed in some way or another
• Temporary or permanent/acute change
• Changes in functioning and/or appearance
• Short- and/or long-term implications

Serving as a Secure Base

What we ask of parents
• Predictability
• Emotional attunement
• Sensitivity
• Contingent responsiveness
• Co-regulation
• Mutuality
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Serving as a Secure Base

What we ask of parents
- Consistency
- Emotional attunement
- Sensitivity
- Contingent responsiveness
- Co-regulation
- Mutuality

PTSD symptomatology
- Sleep problems
- Hypervigilance
- Difficulty concentrating
- Irritability or outbursts
- Hallucinations/flashbacks
- Exaggerated startle response
- Feelings of detachment/estrangement
- Restricted range of affect

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TBI symptomatology
- Disorganization
- Impulsivity
- Fatigue
- Headaches
- Vision problems
- Depression

Parent-Child Relationship

Complex Veteran Family Issues that Can Significantly Affect Early Relationships
Caregiver impairment
- Injury
- Depression
- Substance Abuse
Family violence/addiction/child maltreatment history
Child with special needs
Significant financial stressors

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• Service member parent’s PTSD symptoms predicted child depression, internalizing behaviors, and externalizing behaviors

• Service member parent’s depression served as robust predictor of child’s internalizing behaviors

• Nat’l Guard soldier parent’s PTSD had direct and indirect effects on self-reported parenting behaviors, including impaired parenting (Mogil et al., 2010) (Gewirtz, Polusney, Khaylis, Erbes, & DeGarmo, 2010)

Challenges for Military Families

• Isolation
• Separations/Loss
• Frequent Moves
• Disruption of Relationships
• Facing potentially dangerous experiences
• Risks for family conflict

Still Face Experiment

Photo Courtesy Department of Defense

ZERO TO THREE, 2013

Still Face Experiment

The “Still Face” Experiment

Photo courtesy of ZERO TO THREE
Mis-attunement Happens!

- That’s ok - without parental missteps and other challenges there would be no opportunities to learn adaptation skills and the art of resilience. Repair is needed.
- Balance is key

Buffering Babies and Toddlers From Stress

Support Routine Sense of Control

Fundamentals of Attachment Theory

Globally defined as a lasting and reciprocal connectedness between human beings

“There is no such thing as a baby.”

— Winnicott, 1960, p. 88
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Relationships: The Dance of Attunement

- Attunement represents the caregiver and child being “in tune” or “in sync” with one another.
- We look for indicators of attunement in the ability to read one another’s cues/behaviors, verbal and non-verbal communications and shared emotions/affect.

Listening to the Behavior

- What cues might we see indicating a child is experiencing stress or trauma?

When Additional Support Is Needed

- Identify signs when a child is saying, “I’m having a hard time.”
- Assist parents in recognizing signs that they need additional support
- Share and use resources without overwhelming families— or yourself
- Refer families to the next level of care when necessary
 Regulation and Co-Regulation

- How do infants/toddlers engage in self soothing, comforting and self regulating behaviors/strategies? (Regulation)
- How can a parent or caregiver help an infant regulate their response to stress? (attunement)
- How do infants, parents and caregivers influence each other through emotions? (co-regulation)

Fostering Resilience

- Provide a sense of security, patience, and attention to what the child is communicating through their words and behaviors
- Encourage the expression of feelings
- Watch out for reminders (triggers)
- Support child in maintaining connection to the deployed, injured or deceased parent.

Recommendations to Help Children

- [Link to The National Child Traumatic Stress Network website (n.d.)]
Ideas for Supporting Secure Attachment in the face of Separation

- Parents coping with parental separation from the child may borrow ideas from military families, fostering connections and supporting parental reflective capacity.
- Keep the parent in the mind of the child, while also keeping the child in the mind of the parent.
- Anticipatory guidance regarding child development very important—many websites offer parents scheduled information based on their child’s age.
- Storytelling is a helpful technique to promote child’s ability to “make sense” of what has occurred.

Ideas for Promoting Reintegration, Re-Connecting Parent and Child

- Child-led, child’s time.
- Be aware of gatekeeping behaviors by at-home caregiver.
- Encourage special play and other activities that promote child-led parent-child interactions.
- Storytelling may help a child make meaning of parent’s return.
- CPP and PCIT both found to be very helpful when there is a need for a greater level of support.

It’s in Our Nature

- “Very young children stir up powerful feelings in adults (the species is programmed that way).”

(Fenichel, 1992, p 11)
The Little Things You Say and Do Matter!
“How we are is as important as what we do.”

A moment to reflect....
▷ Think of a time when you were helped just by the presence of another.

“Coming Together Around Military and Veteran Families”

www.zerotothree.org

The Voice of the Baby
Even if a baby is born long after leaving active duty, the lingering effects of invisible injuries can be the ghost that whispers in the nursery.
Contact Information

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Thank you for all you do to support families with young children!

References

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References


References (continued)

- Zero to Three (2003). Little listeners in an uncertain world: Coping strategies for a deployed parent and their child during deployment or when a crisis occurs. Washington, DC: ZERO TO THREE

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