Fostering resilience in children exposed to domestic violence

Practical strategies EC staff can put into action

by Karen Stephens

Whether staff realizes it or not, early childhood programs are not just fun and engaging places for children to play and learn. For some children, our programs are bonafide daytime havens from turmoil. I'm speaking specifically about those children who find themselves in the cross-fire of violence between the people they love most in the world — their own family members. The violence might be verbal intimidation and humiliation, or a combination of verbal and physical attack. Either way, it's terrifying for the children witnessing assault behind closed doors. Whether violent episodes in the home are a one-time occurrence — or a long time, repeated pattern of family dysfunction — the fallout of violence leaves a mark on children's emotional spirit and overall development, including typical brain development.

Children enmeshed in violence don't experience a relaxed, predictable, or trusting home life. In fact, children exposed to home violence often experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) just as adults do after enduring violence. Domestic violence robs children of their childhood. And while early childhood staff can't erase the effects of violence on children's individual make-up, they can become a positive mediating factor. By nurturing children's ability to rebound from challenges, early childhood professionals can help children become resilient, despite their early experiences with trauma.

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To become an effective 'resilience factor' for children, we must be aware of the effects of violence on children. Early childhood staff — especially classroom teachers and caregivers — need to be alert to symptoms that suggest children may feel under siege in their own home. With that knowledge, we can make specific adjustments in our classrooms and programs to increase children's resilience. If we do so with intentional and consistent effort, we can help traumatized children feel more trusting, safe, secure, and hopeful about life, despite their personal experience with family violence. We can be an intervention to show children an alternative view of human interaction that is characterized by dignified interactions and respectful conflict resolution. It's another side of life they desperately need to believe in.

Children's behavioral clues indicating trauma due to domestic violence

Following are some symptoms early childhood staff might observe. A cluster of behaviors should be considered a 'red flag' needing immediate and thoughtful attention.

Any behavior clues should be documented over time to reveal a pattern. Reviewing the pattern can help staff create a coordinated strategy to help the child and his or her family. Calm, responsive efforts to support all involved can promote greater emotional health through open communication and constructive problem solving. Throughout that responsive process, children's resilience is fostered.

Children exposed to family violence may:

- Be easily distracted, unable to concentrate, and daydream often
- Often retreat or disengage from the group into silent occupation, such as hiding in a cozy space playing alone
- Become aloof, emotionally numbed or 'zoned out' — what is sometimes called dissociation — in order to keep the pain of hurtful memories at bay

- React disproportionately frightened after making even a minor mistake or a 'mess'
- Excessively cling to one adult or revert to behavior associated with earlier stages of development (i.e., bedwetting, whining, sucking thumb)
- Repeatedly act out traumatic incidents during dramatic play, such as when acting out family life or playing with dolls or puppets
- Appear jumpy with a quick and frequent 'startle-reflex' in response to loud, unexpected sounds — even laughter
- Appear hypervigilant in monitoring classroom atmosphere and especially harmony between adults
- Avoid eye contact with adults or use a 'white lie' when answering an adult's direct question about the child's or a parent's home behavior
- Experience frequent sleep disturbances, including nightmares
- Have unwanted, intrusive memory flashbacks of traumatic events when trying to go to sleep at nap- or bedtime
- Become agitated when it's time to go home, especially before weekends
- Act especially relieved to arrive at child care after weekends
- Consistently avoid a specific gender or pretend one parent isn't really part of the family (usually omitting the one the child views as the instigator of family violence)
- Show changes in eating behavior (increase or decrease)
- Acquire bumps, cuts , bruises or broken bones (from getting in the way of fighting adults — sometimes called 'cross-fire' by victims)
- Have frequent headaches and/or stomachaches
- Be aggressive, physically as well as using insulting or taunting behavior (verbal as well as non-verbal) toward peers and even toward embroiled parents.

Fostering children's resilience: Strategies to consider

Children's resilience depends on a number of factors. For instance, children born with a more flexible, social, and 'easy' temperament and an optimistic attitude tend to bounce back from adversity more effectively. Children who develop a sense of faith and trust that life will turn out for the best are also more resilient.

Early childhood program staff don't have control over those resilience factors, but there are many other ways teachers can influence a child's ability to flourish despite vulnerability. Here are some strategies early childhood staff can apply to support all children's resilience. The strategies are especially helpful to children traumatized by domestic violence.

- *Maintain a strong one-on-one relationship with a child over time.* Take special note of a child's well-being so they feel accepted. Let children know you are a safe, reliable person to turn to for help. Research shows that one consistent, supportive, attentive, and responsive person in a child's life can go a long way toward building resilience. That 'one person' is most often a grandparent, teacher, or favorite neighbor. School-age children often mention coaches as making a big contribution to their resilience.
- *Don't push children to discuss their experiences.* It's important to be available so children have the opportunity to talk about anxiety or fears, but undue pressure leads to withdrawal. Patiently observe as the child warms up to confide in you.
- *Listen to a child's feelings as well as facts he may share.* Empathize with a child's point of view with a rich vocabulary about feelings. Listen leisurely without rushing a child. If you ask questions, use gentle, open-ended ones. For instance, if you wish to follow up on a child's comment or behavior, you could say, "I'm wondering what you could tell me about . . . ".
- *Be prepared for some children to avoid talking.* For children reluctant to talk, provide other safe ways to communicate, such as through puppetry, storytelling, story writing, or making up stories in the dramatic play or block center.
- *Help children identify emotions and model a rich vocabulary about feelings.* This helps children learn how to express and act on powerful emotions. Pair words with facial expressions; it helps children learn that everyone has unique feelings. With preschoolers, gradually introduce new words to 'name' feelings associated with anger, such as: frightened, anxious, mad, scared, angry, worried, nervous, afraid, frustrated, confused, ignored, embarrassed, or mad.
- *Help children learn to interpret others' emotions.* Gently remind them that everyone has feelings and rights. Being sensitive to others' emotions and then taking into account different perspectives is very hard for young children; it's a high-level thinking skill. Be patient; it's an emerging skill that takes time to develop. Encourage toddlers to empathize by 'translating' others' body language and angry feelings: "That boy is mad, he's crying because someone grabbed his toy from him. He wants it back."
- *Have both male and female teachers in the classroom.* It's important for children to witness both genders caring for children and working peacefully and cooperatively with each other. If you don't have both genders as paid staff, work to seek qualified volunteers to ensure balanced representation.
- *Declare your program premises a safe zone for all.* If disagreements between parents or other family members (such as aunt, uncles, or grandparents) threaten to erupt, invite them into a private office in the center. This will maintain classroom harmony and remind adults of children's needs for

a calm and respectful atmosphere.

- *Be a good example. Illustrate the behavior you expect.* If you don't want kids yelling, name-calling, or belittling others, change your own ways first.
- *Identify children's unique talents.* Focusing on a specific talent is one way a child creates her own identity. It also provides solace and mental relief from emotional strain. Provide consistent positive and specific feedback to nurture them. For instance, if a child has a talent for music, integrate musical and movement activities into your curriculum. In all activities, encourage creativity, teamwork, and respectful problem solving.
- *Role model a positive attitude to inspire children.* Exemplify optimism. Invite children to join you in taking joy in the small wonders of life that are free and available to all — such as a lovely sunny day, a songbird calling to its mate, or the scent of a lilac in bloom.
- *Avoid being overly self-critical by taking mistakes in stride.* This will show children they don't have to be too hard on themselves every time they make a mistake. (Children often incorrectly assume their mistakes cause family violence.)
- *Connect children to sensory relaxation activities to manage stress constructively.* From watching clouds float by to playing with play dough, there are many ways children can find respite from the stress of family violence. Provide stress-relieving activities, including outdoor and nature play, sensory art materials, sand and water play, and gardening, singing and dancing to music.
- *Connect children to safe nature whenever possible.* Research shows nature can be soothing for children. The regular cycle of seasons and all the sensory delights of varying seasons help build children's sense of attachment and security. Visit local parks regularly to adopt a favorite tree or garden. If you have time and space to care for them well, include a safe, approachable pet in your classroom. Animals give children a sense of unconditional love and an ear that listens patiently.
- *Provide plenty of time for self-initiated 'free play,' especially pretend play.* Children use play as a way to make sense of the world around them. They also use it as a way to relax and gain control over their thinking.
- *Give children a sense of control over their activities.* At home, life can spin out of control at a moment's notice, leaving these children with a depressing sense of powerlessness. You can counter those feelings by giving children choices.
- *Welcome children to contribute to classroom well-being.* For instance, children can help prepare snacks, set tables, water plants, and care for pets. That sense of competent independence allows them to realize they make a positive difference in the classroom, and that builds resilience.
- *Affirm that everyone has equal rights to emotional and physical safety in the classroom.* Let children see social justice put into action so they can observe and consider this along with the style of interaction they may be seeing in the home. Implement non-biased practices to counter 'isms' of all kinds.
- *Maintain a stable staff and a predictable schedule and classroom routine.* Keep to a 'no surprises' schedule. Help anxious children anticipate what comes next. Give them warnings about changes, such as a substitute teacher or a classroom visitor. Give them chances to role play or go through a 'rehearsal' to prepare them for a field trip or upcoming celebration. Your goal is to counteract a sense of confusion, withdrawal, and helplessness that often develops in children who regularly witness violence.
- *Introduce sound reduction elements in the classroom.* Stressed children can be overwhelmed by excessive and unexpected noises. They have a strong 'startle reflex' that that has a quicker trigger than the typical child's. Carpeting, acoustic tiles, or cloth covered dividers help reduce noise. Slamming doors and similar sounds should also be avoided.
- *Provide an uncluttered, organized classroom that allows children to easily see toys and how they may be used.* Traumatized children often have trouble concentrating — perhaps because they are often vigilantly 'on the lookout' for violence to erupt at any moment. An uncluttered living and learning space helps them focus and maintain calm.
- *Avoid overcrowding of children and materials.* Create areas where children can easily share and cooperate so children see group interaction is possible without aggression. To avoid overwhelming children with too much stimuli, have fewer resources in the room at one time through periodic rotation.
- *Include small cozy spaces for retreat in the classroom.* These spaces help promote security and calm. Create nooks that fit no more than two children at a time. A discarded appliance box — with windows cut out and pillows tossed in for comfort — works. An indoor or outdoor picnic table with a sheet placed over it to create a tent provides children a sense of sanctuary and protection. Even a small two-person camping tent in the classroom gives children a little shelter to snuggle up with a puppet or book or crayons and paper. Sturdy lofts also provide personal play space on top as well as under the loft.
- *Include 'soft' elements in the classroom to add gentleness.* Add relaxing classroom items such as loveseats with washable slip covers, floor pillows, quilts on walls, gliders, or rocking chairs for relaxing and calming. Stuffed animals and diverse dolls for children to hug are important, too.
- *Offer outdoor cozy spaces, too.* A natural 'green' retreat is soothing. In your outdoor space, create a bower of non-toxic bushes. Tree houses or small log cabins or other types of play houses are good, too. A weeping willow tree creates a

fanciful place for children to relax and play while still allowing teachers to visually supervise. A shaded family-style porch swing offers casual opportunities for children to converse with peers or adults. A trickling water fountain or wind chimes can ease tense shoulders.

- *Role model and coach children in stress and anger management.* Conduct parent education events where parents learn to do the same.
- *Use positive discipline.* Focus on cooperative problem solving and peaceful conflict resolution. Boundaries for acceptable behavior should be stated clearly and consistently enforced with developmentally appropriate consequences.
- *Encourage language usage rather than physical aggression.* Ask children to tell you what they want or need. Remind children to use language, rather than grunts, shoves, or hits: "I know it's hard to wait for your classmate to give you more blocks. Tell him calmly you want more. Pushing him doesn't make him want to share with you."
- *Help children learn to recognize symptoms of anger.* Help children recognize and monitor their unique 'warning signs' for anger-overload. They may become red in the face, grit teeth, tense shoulders, or feel short of breath. When that happens, prompt the child to notice the physical sensations as reminders to calm down. Then suggest ways to regain calm and composure. For instance, share tips such as slow rhythmic breathing, listening to music, or playing a physical game.
- *Take a stand against physical aggression and name-calling.* Children may be hearing many harsh — even brutal — statements at home. At child care, you can give them an alternate viewpoint. For instance, respond to an altercation by saying, "I won't let you hurt your classmate. I'd never let him hit you, either. Think of another way to let him know what you're feeling."
- *Offer specific feedback and encouragement for self-control.* Comment on a child's respectful expression of anger whenever possible, such as "I heard you and Andy arguing over the wagon. That was a good idea to reassure him you'd give it to him next."
- *Post information on community resources helping victims of domestic violence.* Distribute e-mails announcing community workshops on parenting and/or mental health. Include resource agencies and web resources in your newsletter, parent bulletin board, or on your web site so any parent can identify help that is within reach.
- *Facilitate family access to intervention services as soon as possible.* Respectfully and privately consult with a child's family members about your concerns. Make relevant referrals and check back to see how referrals worked for families. When needed, make calls to appropriate social service professionals. Be prepared to help families identify and learn how to select suitable family counselors or play therapists who help children cope with the emotional upheaval of witnessing violence. Strive to build parent resilience so children can be inspired by them, too.
- *Reporting suspected child abuse or neglect.* In the United States, many organizations consider exposing children to home violence a form of parental child neglect and abuse. However, since such incidents do, in fact, usually happen at home behind closed doors, staff often feels hesitant to report domestic violence incidents to the proper authorities. There still remains a strong cultural influence not to intrude or 'butt into' a family's personal life — especially matters between a child's parents. However, to neglect reporting strong suspicions of domestic violence — especially when families resist seeking referral help — merely leaves children to drift alone and abandoned in a home characterized by chaotic, out of control, and frightening events that are beyond the average adult's ability to imagine or grasp.

In Conclusion

Early childhood programs are often the first resource beyond extended family that children encounter. That puts us in a pivotal position to reach out to victims of domestic violence early, before trauma becomes chronic and enduring. If we are willing to break the silence of domestic violence, we can help children and families thrive more fully for a lifetime. Their resulting resilience will benefit us all.

Resources on helping children exposed to domestic violence

Web sites

Young Children Living with Domestic Violence: The Role of Early Childhood Programs
www.nccev.org/pdfs/series_paper2.pdf

ResilienceNet
http://resilnet.uiuc.edu

Promoting Resilience: Helping Young Children and Parents Affected by Substance Abuse, Domestic Violence, and Depression in the Context of Welfare Reform (U.S.)
www.nccp.org./publications/pdf/text_389.pdf

National Center for Children Exposed to Violence (NCCEV)
www.nccev.org

Child Welfare Information Gateway: Domestic Violence
www.childwelfare.gov/systemwide/service_array/domviolence

How to Support a Child Who Has Witnessed Violence
www.childwitnesstoviolence.org/help_achild/help_support.html

Violence and Young Children's Development
http://resilnet.uiuc.edu/library/wallac94.html

Safe from the Start: Taking Action on Children Exposed to Violence
www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojjdp/182789.pdf

Domestic Violence and Abuse: Types, Signs, Symptoms, Causes, and Effects
www.aaets.org/article144.htm

Caught in the Crossfire: Children and Domestic Violence
www.aaets.org/article162.htm

Questions and Answers About Domestic Violence
www.nctsnet.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/QA_Groves_final.pdf

Complex Trauma in Early Childhood
www.aaets.org/article174.htm

Violence Prevention in Early Childhood: How Teachers Can Help
http://actagainstviolence.apa.org/materials/publications/act/violenceprevention_childhood.pdf

Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators
www.nctsnet.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/Child_Trauma_Toolkit_Final.pdf

Psychological and Behavioral Impact of Trauma: Preschool Children
www.nctsnet.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/preschool_children.pdf

Little Eyes, Little Ears: How Violence against a Mother Shapes Children as They Grow
www.lfcc.on.ca/little_eyes_little_ears.html

For Post-traumatic Stress Disorder in Children: American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry
www.aacap.org/cs/root/facts_for_families/posttraumatic_stress_disorder_ptsd

Illinois Early Learning Project Ask An Expert
http://illinoisearlylearning.org/askanexpert/stephens2009/sup.htm

Books

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