

Fostering Resilience in Early Childhood Settings: Responding to Children Who Have Experienced Maltreatment

What is Childhood Maltreatment and Why Is It Important for Teachers in Early Childhood Settings to Understand?

- Child maltreatment is defined by experiences of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, neglect, and exposure to domestic violence in the first 18 years of life.
- Child maltreatment in the early years can have significant and long-lasting impacts on a child's cognitive, social-emotional and physical development.
- Child maltreatment can co-exist with other kinds of traumatic experiences such as racism/discrimination, natural disasters, scary medical procedures, etc. It is important that educators consider children's diversity of experiences.



What Might Teachers See in the Early Childhood Classroom?

- Physical Outcomes:
 - Physical abuse and neglect can lead to delayed physical growth and development in young children.
- Emotional and Behavioral Outcomes:
 - “Explosive” behaviors (e.g., tantrums or screaming)
 - Withdrawal
 - Anxiety and Depression
 - Aggression
 - Rule-breaking behaviors
 - Impulsivity
- Cognitive Outcomes:
 - Maltreatment can lead to deficits in learning, language production, memory and overall IQ.^{5,6}
- Interpersonal Outcomes:
 - The behavior problems listed above can also lead children with histories of maltreatment to be bullied, ostracized or disliked by peers.⁴

What Teachers in Early Childhood Settings Can Do?

Many children who experience child maltreatment are **resilient**, meaning they cope with adversity and exhibit positive development. Resilience is a process that involves both internal assets (e.g., emotion regulation skills) and external supports, including **teachers and schools!**

ADVERSITY IS NOT DESTINY! POSITIVE, CONSISTENT, EQUITABLE, AND NURTURING RELATIONSHIPS WITH ONE CARING ADULT CAN MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE – TEACHERS CAN BE THAT ADULT.³

- **Build a Safe, Consistent, & Predictable Environment:** Establish clear expectations, routines, and developmentally appropriate rules for young children. The rules must be visually supported and explicitly taught, reviewed, and positively reinforced.
 - *Try placing a visual schedule at the child's eye level so they know what to expect throughout the school day!*
- **Provide Emotional Support and Explicit Instruction:** Behaviors often labeled as “misbehavior” may instead be the child’s attempt to adapt to maltreatment. Help children by explicitly teaching emotional literacy, helping them to understand the range of emotions & integrating step by step problem solving and emotional self-regulation instruction into their daily routine.
 - *Using “feeling faces” or “feeling cards” placed throughout the classroom can help children learn about different emotions.*
- **Build Positive, Nurturing, Caring Relationships:** Take time to build rapport with children, engage in one-on-one interactions, and provide opportunities for positive social interactions with peers.
 - *For example, make sure to greet each child by their name in the morning, and try giving them the option of a hug, high-five, or wave!*
- **Provide Opportunities for Play & Joyful Learning:** Help children who have experienced maltreatment by providing opportunities for creative and imaginative play, exploration, musical experiences,³ and outdoor and gross-motor activities.
 - *For example, you might give children a sense of agency by allowing them to choose their play materials. You might also provide open-ended creative play opportunities (e.g., painting or other art materials) for children to process and communicate their feelings and experiences.*
- **Engage in Cross-System Collaborations and Commit to Equity:** Help the children by working collaboratively across systems, including mental and behavioral health, the court system, and the child welfare system. This may include providing appropriate referrals when possible and working to develop strategies to support the child both inside and outside the classroom.
 - *For example, when appropriate, communicate with caregivers about children's process and goals during the school year or advocate for early developmental screenings as needed to ensure children are receiving the appropriate services and resources.*

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