

If interested, this topic can be learned in greater detail through a full day workshop called “Trauma Informed Classrooms.” Please contact Sara at sara@growingrootstherapy.ca or 204-333-9804 for more information or to book a workshop.

Being Trauma Sensitive

Effect of Trauma on the Brain

Attachment & Trauma

Attachment Theory^{1,5} – A child’s first caregiving relationship(s) influences the way they think about being loved, helping to create brain pathways to understand the social world, and be engaged in healthy talk and play. The *ideal* attachment figure provides a soothing presence (i.e. protects the child from stressful situations). The child takes in the thoughts and feelings evoked from interactions with their caregiver and learns how to regulate their own behaviour through those events.

Developmental Trauma^{1,3,5} – Where typical development is disrupted by chronic exposure to interpersonal trauma (i.e. sexual or physical abuse, war, community violence). Effects include:

- The child feels a lack of control, connection, and meaning
- Internal states (physiological and emotional) cannot be regulated when stressed
- Avoidance of situations that can cause re-traumatization
- Early positive styles of attachment → increases effective information processing later on in life
- Negative effects on functioning in school, home, or work-related settings

Impact of Trauma on Brain & Body

The brain is grouped into three areas (in order of development)³:

- 1. Brainstem (Survival Brain)** – Receives Motor & Sensory input; least complex
- 2. Limbic Brain (Feeling Brain)** – Emotions, Attachment, Behaviours; more complex
- 3. Cortical Brain (Thinking Brain)** – Thinking, Planning, Inhibiting, and Learning; most complex

Survival Brain (Am I safe?)^{1,2,3}

- This part of the brain keeps us alive (e.g. Fight/Flight/Submit/Freeze responses to danger).
- If one is traumatized in one extreme event or repeatedly, chemical reactions in the body & brain are turned on → ready to survive in novel (safe or dangerous) situations
- Survival trumps all other brain functions; if children are using this part of the brain, even positive information cannot be processed since it cannot get to higher parts of the brain

- E.g. Traumatized children have a decreased capacity to regulate strong emotions → they will respond immediately without thinking it through first
- Developmental Trauma effects: sensory and physical factors
 - Observations: Sensory processing difficulties, high or low arousal, heart rate difficulties, and abnormal breathing

Feeling Brain (Am I loved?)³

- Developmental Trauma effects: attachment, emotional and behavioural regulation
 - Observations: Distrustful, anger, numbness, low mood, aggression

Learning/Thinking Brain (Can I learn from this?)^{2,3}

- It can take a lot of effort to get to this stage, especially when one is constantly in a prolonged survival mode.
- Developmental Trauma effects: low self-esteem, dissociation, and cognitive problems
 - Observations: Difficulty processing information, forgetfulness, inattention, seem thoughtless and uncaring, problems in planning, organizing, and executing

Towards Resiliency

- Developmental trauma can be repaired, with the correct order and type of support from the child's environments, including the home, school, and therapy.³
 - Support the survival brain first, then the feeling brain, and lastly the learning brain
- The child needs to feel safe and supported in a relationship with a caring adult in order to successfully engage in play and learning.
- Caretakers, including teachers and educational assistants, have an important role in developing children's early social, supportive experiences in order for the child to learn and develop effective coping skills.⁴

Resources

1. Downey, L. (2007). *Calmer classrooms : A guide to working with traumatised children*. Child Safety Commissioner: Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.
2. Ham, J. (2017). Understanding trauma: learning brain vs survival brain. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KogaUANGvpA&t=190s>
3. Lyons, S., Dr. (2017). *The repair of early trauma: A 'bottom up' approach*. Retrieved from <http://beaconhouse.org.uk/developmental-trauma/the-repair-of-early-trauma-a-bottom-up-approach/>
4. Stewart, J., & Martin, L. (2018). *Bridging Two Worlds: Supporting Newcomer and Refugee Youth*. CERIC: Toronto, ON.
5. van der Kolk, B.A. (n.d.). Developmental Trauma Disorder. *Psychiatric Annals*. Retrieved from https://traumaticstressinstitute.org/wp-content/files_mf/1276541701VanderKolkDvptTraumaDis.pdf

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