

# Developmental Trauma and Autism Spectrum Disorder: *Practice Considerations for the Treatment of Challenging Behavior*

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## Learning Outcomes

- The Developmental Trauma framework
- The complexity of co-occurring Autism Spectrum Disorder, Developmental Trauma and Challenging Behavior
- Trauma considerations in the assessment of challenging behavior
- Trauma-Informed Care (TIC)

## 5 Assumptions About Trauma

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1) Trauma is real

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2) Trauma is prevalent

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3) Trauma is toxic to the brain and effects learning and development

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4) We need to be prepared to support kids who have experienced trauma

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5) Children are resilient, and within positive learning environments & relationships, they can grow learn and succeed

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# What is trauma?

**“Individual** trauma results from an **event, series of events,** or **set of circumstances** that is experienced by an **individual** as **physically** and/or **emotionally harmful** or **threatening** and that has **lasting adverse effects** on the individual’s **functioning** and mental, physical, social, emotional, and/or spiritual **wellbeing.**”

(U.S. Department of Health & Human Services-Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration, 2013)

# Three types of trauma

## Acute trauma

Results from a single incident

## Chronic trauma

Results from repeated and prolonged events

## Complex trauma (Developmental Trauma)

Results from exposure to varied and multiple traumatic events, often of an invasive, *interpersonal* nature

# Why the distinction of developmental trauma?

## Complex Trauma Task Force Survey

- Survey of clinicians of 17,000 children receiving trauma-focused treatment due to child maltreatment
  - **80%** of the children in treatment “exposed to multiple and/or prolonged interpersonal trauma”
- Only **25%** of the children met the existing criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

# Autism & Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

## Autism

## PTSD

Social-emotional reciprocity

Social withdrawal

Repetitive use of objects

Intrusive memories

Inflexibility

Irritability/Anger

Social communication

Reduction of positive emotions

(Sleep disturbance)

Nightmares/Sleep disturbance

Stavropoulos, K. M. (2018)

7

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# Developmental Trauma Framework

## Diagnostic

### A. Exposure

The child or adolescent has experienced or witnessed multiple or prolonged adverse events over a period of at least one year beginning in childhood or early adolescence

### B. Affective and Physiological Dysregulation

The child exhibits impaired normative developmental competencies related to arousal regulation.

### C. Attentional and Behavioral Dysregulation

The child exhibits impaired normative developmental competencies related to sustained attention, learning or coping with stress.

### D. Self and Relational Dysregulation

The child exhibits impaired normative developmental competencies in their sense of personal identity and involvement in relationships.

### E. Posttraumatic Spectrum Symptoms

## Lived Experiences

### A. Exposure

Kids see and experience things they shouldn't repeatedly or for long periods of time

### B. Affective and Physiological Dysregulation

Difficulty with understanding & regulating emotions

Difficulty with interpreting and managing the way emotions come out in actions or how they are expressed in their body

### C. Attentional and Behavioral Dysregulation

Paying attention, learning and maintaining appropriate behaviors for specific social settings is REALLY HARD

### D. Self and Relational Dysregulation

Being a friend and making a friend is confusing and hard

Finding positive things about oneself can be hard



# Developmental Trauma

Proposed for inclusion into the *Diagnostic & Statistical Manual-5* (2013), ultimately not included

“A developmental approach to understanding disorders of trauma would support the imperative notion that such a diagnosis is complicated, in that there are constant changes with the individual child/youth/adult (genetically and otherwise) that are further complicated by the individual’s interaction with his/ her environment. Further, a developmental approach would appropriately recognize the interactive effect of such dynamics of familial systems, as well as cultural and societal expectations.”

(Bremness & Polzin, 2014)

9

# BUT...

2/3 of youth experience at least one potentially traumatic event by the age of 16

National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2020

“Domestic violence, psychological abuse, sexual assault, sudden or violent loss of a loved one, [and natural disasters]”

Hoover & Kaufman, 2018

“Covid-19 pandemic likely increased the risk of exposure to multiple traumatic experiences and complex forms of trauma”

Collin-Vezina et al., 2020 & Guessoum et al., 2020

Autistic children are at significant risk for bullying, abuse, and sexual assault and this risk is greater than their neurotypical peers

La Greca et al., 2018

An Exploratory Review of the Associations between Adverse Experiences and Autism

# Overlapping Behavioral Observations in ASD & Developmental Trauma

Lack of interest  
in peers

Failure to share  
emotion/affect

Repetitive play

Outbursts

Sleep difficulty

Communication  
difficulties

Atypical  
sensory  
responses

Failure to  
regulate  
emotion/affect

Disruptive  
classroom  
behavior

Poor academic  
performance

Compromised  
executive  
functioning

Problems with  
language  
development

# Developmental response to trauma

Nearly all children and adolescents express  
some kind of **distress** or **behavioral change**  
in the acute phase of recovery from a traumatic event.

# Behavioral Function

## Why is this behavior happening?

Influences on our behavior,  
but may not be recognizable in the environment

### Antecedent

- What happens immediately before a behavior

### Behavior

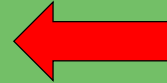
- The demonstration of the behavior
- "*What it looks like.*"

### Consequence

- What happens immediately after a behavior

# Challenging Behavior Consideration One

## TRAUMA AS



Influences on our behavior, but may not be recognizable in the environment

### Antecedent

- What happens immediately before a behavior



### Behavior

- The demonstration of the behavior
- "*What it looks like.*"



### Consequence

- What happens immediately after a behavior

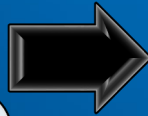
# Challenging Behavior Consideration Two

## TRAUMA AS

Influences on our behavior, but may not be recognizable in the environment

### Antecedent

- What happens immediately before the behavior is related to the **TRAUMA EXPERIENCE**



### Behavior

- The demonstration of behavior
- "What it looks like."



### Consequence

- What happens immediately following a behavior



# Challenging Behavior Consideration Three

## TRAUMA AS

Influences on our behavior, but may not be recognizable in the environment

### Antecedent

- What happens immediately before the behavior

### Behavior

- The behavior is directly related to the trauma
- **Trauma Re-enactment**
- Imitating what happened

### Consequence

- What happens in the environment immediately following a challenging behavior



# Challenging Behavior Consideration Four

## TRAUMA AS

Influences on our behavior, but may not be recognizable in the environment

### Antecedent

- What happens immediately before the behavior

### Behavior

- The demonstration of behavior
- "What it looks like"

### Consequence

- What happens immediately after the behavior is **TRAUMA RELATED** and then serves to sustain the challenges in the moment

“A Trauma-Informed approach, often referred to as *trauma informed care* (TIC), is a promising model for organizational change in health, behavioral health, and other settings that promotes resilience in staff and patients.”

Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)



# Trauma-Informed Care (TIC)

## SAFETY

- Ensuring physical & emotional safety

## CHOICE

- Individual has choice & control

## COLLABORATION

- Making decisions with the individual and sharing power

## TRUSTWORTHINESS

- Task clarity, consistency & Interpersonal Boundaries

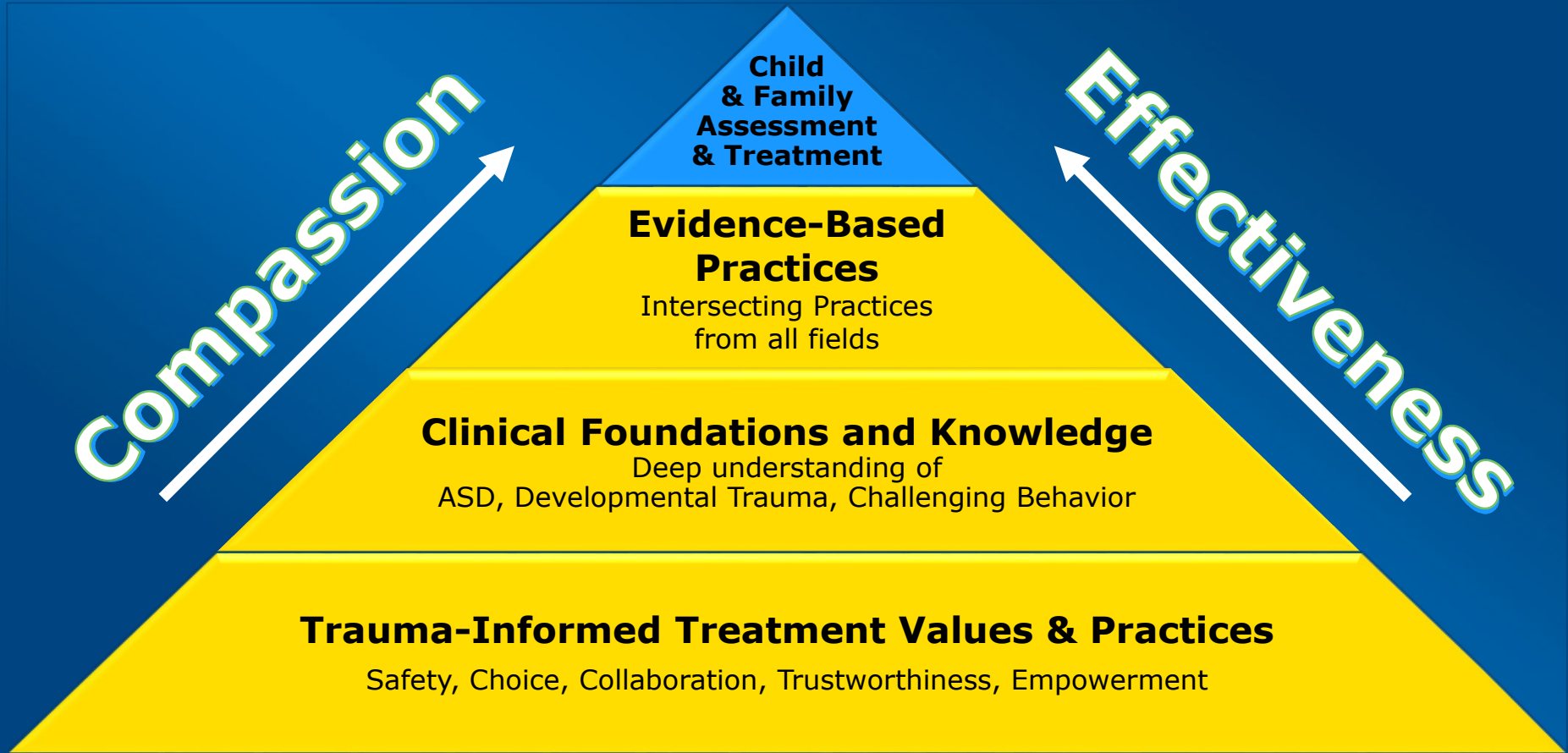
## EMPOWERMENT

- Prioritizing empowerment & skills building

These qualities of care are "actioned" in profession-specific ethics codes and practice guidelines

19

# Putting it all together



# Resources

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Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration <https://www.samhsa.gov/>



# Thank you.

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