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“A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work”

TREATING TRAUMATIZED CHILDREN: SEEDS TO BLOSSOMS

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Come with me and follow the journey of a traumatized child. God in his great wisdom has given us so many ways to understand his word and our meaning of life. His amazing use of parables in the Bible makes our understanding so much more visual and provides greater depth and meaning to his teachings. In this same way, we can capture the struggles of a traumatized child as it is so incredibly difficult to put these experiences into words. Flowers cover our earth with their beauty and sweet smells in such a vast array of sizes and shapes as do God's children.

The Seed

Let us start with the seed. But, before we can have a seed, we have to have the soil in which it will grow. And, we also need to have the flowers that the seed was formed from. Just as this tiny seed, the child starts its life in the womb and has been given some genetic inheritances as well as experiences within the womb. The soil can be rich and full of nutrients, dry and barren, or a combination of the two depending on the time and season. As with the soil that the seed finds itself in, the newborn child can experience varying degrees of care from his parents from needs being fully and securely met to very little nurturance and support or varying up and down depending on the stability of the caregiver.

The Seedling

As the seed begins to sprout and come up from the depths of the soil, it begins to breathe and have life. It now experiences the environment in which it was planted. The soil and the limitations of that soil, the air and gentleness or harshness of it, the sun that provides the warmth and security for growth and the varying degrees of sunshine, the rain and the nutrients that it provides to the seedling and the varying amount of rain it receives, the

clouds and the nighttime that is meant to provide rest to the seedling from the business of the day, the other flowers, trees, and plants that are available to shelter and accompany the seedling, and the animals, insects, and birds that tickle or tackle the seedling all begin to impact the life of the seedling. As too, in the life of the young child, the environment surrounds the child and sets in to impact the developing body and brain. The ability of the parents to meet the needs and the manner in which they do so, the love and security they are able to provide, the safety, the basic needs, all begin to shape the child.

The Flower

As this seedling becomes a flower, as most seedlings do, it will be shaped and formed from its inheritances and experiences. It will begin to interact and respond to the environment of which it is a part. It will produce as well. It is then that we will begin to see the impacts on this flower from its difficult experiences of harsh rain and limited shelter or only fleeting periods of sunshine, or the attacks of birds and insects. The flower may be smaller and not as vibrant, or tougher on the exterior but weak in the stem. But yet, it is still a flower, in a patch with many other flowers. It may stand alone or it might blend in with a mass of flowers. It might be bold and noticeable because of its differences from other flowers or it might just have some different creases in the petals from a storm or two. But, yet, it is still a flower. As too, the traumatized child has been shaped by the experiences in his life and begins to make meaning from these repeated experiences, which we call complex trauma. He views the world from these experiences and responds based upon what he has learned. With limited amounts of nurture (sun) and basic needs (rain) perhaps not being met consistently, he learns to deal with what he has. His coping skills are often still at a primitive level and have not been encouraged to grow. He finds the coping skills that work for him in his mind to be safe. He hides in a crowd so as to not get noticed or he bullies the others because he doesn't feel like he fits in anyway. He quickly is hurt or offended and is overly sensitive or he is always on the edge waiting for the next storm to hit. He doesn't seek shelter because he has learned that it is not there consistently.

Transplanting The Flower

Well then, there is the gardener who adores flowers and wants to create a healthy space for the flower to flourish so she transplants the flower to a more ideal location. This new soil is rich in nutrients, lots and lots of sun and rain when needed. It has shade trees, insecticide for protection, and all the flower needs to grow. If you are a gardener, you know that transplanting is no easy thing and flowers sometimes have some difficulty thriving with a move. The flower may not be used to much sun and watering so it shrivels up quickly. As too is the experience with a traumatized child. He is given the environment he needs to grow yet likely continues to struggle from the effects of the traumatic experiences. These are an indelible part of his makeup. He continues to struggle with what he has learned and understood about his environment..... Nighttime is scary and bad things happen so don't sleep too sound, eat all the food you can because tomorrow there might not be any, don't let anyone try to keep you safe because you have to be in charge of that.....

Thriving and Moving Forward

To make it in his new environment, the flower will need to begin to create new ways of doing things, accepting more sunlight, allowing the insecticide to be put on, and soaking in the right amount of rain. The traumatized child will need to begin to develop regulation skills and create new experiences and new meanings to his life. He will need to be given tools to help him work through what he is feeling in his body and the traumatic experiences of his past. And then, the flower will be able to thrive. Perhaps this will look a little different than how some of the other flowers thrive, and it will always have that little crease in its petal from the storms, but it will grow. As too, the traumatized child can move forward. The way in which they attach, or the varying degrees in which they respond to those around them may be different than our expectation of what we want them to be, but, we will need to find the sweet smells amidst these differences.

As we venture forward in increasing our understanding and our approach in working with traumatized children, there is much to consider. There are a number of therapeutic approaches to address the needs of these children. Those considered most effective and labeled as most promising practices by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (nctsn.org, 2005) are trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapies. These therapies speak to our understanding of how trauma impacts the brain and the body and our approach in helping children to regulate their bodies and create meaning making to their past and present. This approach, as you can see from the story of the seed, is crucial in order for children to be able to accept the nurturance and new ways of doing things that they are so much afraid of.

Trauma is widespread in our world and we are constantly reminded of it as we turn on the television or read the paper. As such, our knowledge of trauma and its impacts on our population need to continually be expanded. Our expertise in treating trauma victims is most certainly an area of continued growth as well. We have only begun this first step of greater understanding.

Reference

Evidence-Based Interventions for Child Traumatic Stress, www.nctsn.org, retrieved 6/14/05.