

All Feelings are Welcome:

Supporting Children's Resiliency in Stressful Times

The Greta Horwitz Center at Warren Village, Denver, Colorado



Children are in the outdoor classroom playing a made-up game they call 'owies.' They are role-playing and practicing nurturing. They gather around the caring adult, and with dot painters make 'owies' on her and each other. Then they pretend to put band-aids on. Sometimes kisses make the 'owies' better; but sometimes children role-play crying for a few minutes as they accept comforting. While the cries are pretend, the great care and concern expressed by the children and for the children is real and deep. One child gives the nurturing adult an 'owie' then says, "You scared?" "No," she replies, "because you are with me."

This scene happened recently at the Greta Horwitz Learning Center at Warren Village, a program in Denver, Colorado, supporting families faced with homelessness. While the children in this program are coping with one type of stressful situation, families everywhere deal with many challenges on a regular basis. Often center directors and teachers are unaware of the details of children's lives, so they may not realize the need for intentional support as children practice strengthening their innate resiliency. For example, families living in shelters may not feel comfortable sharing that information, so children's behavior may

often be misunderstood. Statistics tell us that one in every 30 children will experience homelessness at some point in their early years, but this alarming reality is often a surprise to directors or college professors preparing pre-service teachers.

The good news is that the approaches adults use to help children cope with stress are also effective ways of working with all children. The child care staff at Warren Village recently shared strategies and 'food for thought' questions all

programs could consider as they support children in strengthening resiliency. A companion piece to this article, prepared by Ileen Henderson, also provides a collection of resources for supporting families dealing with homelessness and other challenges (see page 42).

Learning from Warren Village: Ideas for All of Us

Warren Village combines three essential services in one location: affordable housing that provides a safe place



Photo by Dex Lane

to call home; family 'wrap-around' services; and quality-rated child care. The child care program is licensed for 106 children, six weeks to ten years, and meets NAEYC accreditation requirements. A sense of community permeates the program, so child care director Maggie Rittenhouse wanted to be sure the discussion about supporting resiliency was truly a group effort. Before she turned the conversation over to other staff, Maggie began by offering a strategy that undergirds all of their work.

Strategy: **Welcome all Feelings**

Maggie knows it's important for everyone — teachers, families, and children — to understand that they never have to hide their feelings or be ashamed to express vulnerability, even if it doesn't always feel comfortable.

■ It Begins with Staff

Adults supporting children and families experience their own level of stress. If they are invited to openly express fears

or uncertainty, feelings don't have to go 'underground' and show up later in unhealthy ways. As Maggie said, "We all need to keep building our resilience." Staff turnover often elicits sadness and these feelings need to be welcomed and addressed. Maggie wants to always be open to anything staff wants to address. When discussing issues she tries to say, "I'd really love to hear more about what you are thinking and feeling. Let's talk about this together."

One issue that's important in any program that supports children and families is encouraging staff to discuss individual 'triggers' they experience. Perhaps a child's behavior reminds them of something they find uncomfortable, or a parent's story brings up personal memories that evoke vulnerable feelings. Allowing staff to talk about these triggers with no judgment allows healing and understanding to take place.

Questions for all programs to consider:

Are there regular times your teachers are invited to discuss their triggers in an atmosphere of non-judgment? Are there regular times when the program director invites staff to discuss expectations and needs?

■ It's Important with Families

Parents at Warren Village want a better future for their children and themselves (as is true for all families), but sometimes feel overwhelmed by so many challenges to address at one time. When staff invites an open discussion about these feelings, parents can be supported in focusing on one step at a time and celebrating small successes, instead of worrying about everything at once. Elyse Montgomery,

Warren Village's Director of Family Services, wants to be sure parents know they are not alone. All families sometimes feel overwhelmed by the demands of parenting, no matter what the circumstances of their lives. When child care programs talk openly about this fact, parents can begin to release feelings of guilt.

Questions: How will you encourage families to discuss their vulnerable feelings? During parent-teacher conferences? During parent meetings? Does your parent newsletter provide reassurance that all families feel overwhelmed at times and it's okay to accept those feelings as natural?

■ It's Vital for Children

Teacher Greta Thorpe is sitting on a deck in the natural outdoor classroom next to a group of children with sunny yellow fabric draped over them. Giggling, the preschoolers call to Greta who eagerly joins them inside their 'tent' saying, "It's so cold outside! I'm so glad to be warm in here with you!" Every few minutes, children peek out to invite others in. At one point, two girls collide; one falls down and is in tears. Greta, who is right there to facilitate the opportunity says, "Oh, I see you are crying. You were up and now you are down," gently encouraging the children to look at each other, recognize what happened, and care for each other.

Instead of 'fixing' or denying feelings ("Oh, don't cry"), Greta serves as a comforting presence, supporting children's ability to tap into their own resilience and welcome all feelings. Serving as a facilitator, Greta repeats children's words and encourages listening to each other.

Teacher Monique Brown sits with "Charlie," who is a bit wary of the visitors walking through the infant room. She stays close, acknowledging to him



Photo by Dex Lane

Ileen Henderson is the National Director of the Bright Space Program, the signature program of the Bright Horizons Foundation for Children. The Bright Space Program helps to create play and family spaces in agencies that support children in crisis. These Bright Spaces® allow children an opportunity to feel safe, build important supportive relationships, and experience the joy of childhood and adolescence despite their experience of homelessness. There are over 300 Bright Spaces® around the world and the program continues to grow. In Bright Spaces® relationships can develop, children can feel safe, and families can come together to begin to heal from trauma. Bright Spaces® are multi-faceted hubs of activity where children can step away from the complexities of their lives and simply play. Ileen has a wealth of experience in early childhood, early intervention, Montessori programming, and crisis intervention. Here she shares her 'top ten' resources when exploring the issues of trauma, homelessness, and building resilience in children and adults as they are addressed in this article.

Resiliency — The Devereux Center For Resilient Children produces wonderful resources for Infants, Toddlers, Pre-Schoolers, School-Age Youth, and Adults to promote resilience — specifically in vulnerable populations with challenging behaviors. All of its work is strength based, so the emphasis is success and self-esteem. www.centerforresilientchildren.org/

Feelings — Acorn Dreams, a service of Wingspan, offers an array of free and low-cost evidence-based resources to develop young children's social-emotional skills and healthy decision-making. <http://acorndreams.com/>

Trauma — The Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University is a 'must see' site full of the latest in science-based innovation, presented in a fully understandable way through short videos and briefs. Be sure to view the video titled, "Three Core Concepts in Early Development." <http://developingchild.harvard.edu/resources/three-core-concepts-in-early-development/>

Safety — Childhood Domestic Violence Association's website will help you to understand that Domestic Violence happens to children from every community and is something every teacher needs to understand. Knowing the signs and symptoms and the impact on children's early development can assist you to help a child through this devastating trauma. <http://cdv.org/>

Relationships — The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has created a fabulous resource of 'Essentials for Childhood Framework: Steps to Create Safe, Stable, and Nurturing Relationships and Environments for all Children.' This site has multiple printable resources for teachers and parents. www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childmaltreatment/essentials.html

Triggers — Trauma Informed Care is the state-of-the-art training available to address practitioners' understanding of the needs of persons who have experienced trauma and how to avoid triggers and build a sense of trust. The National Center for Family Homelessness has long been a well-respected source of research, training, and advocacy on this issue. www.air.org/center/homelessness-trauma-informed-care

Consistency/Routines — Zero To Three provides parents and teachers of young children emerging research and resources about developmental milestones and top-notch parenting information. www.zerotothree.org/child-development/

Mindfulness — Having techniques and strategies to cope with stress is important for children and adults alike. Mindfulness is proven to be a simple and effective strategy for coping with stress and living a more thoughtful and intentional life. Mindful is a website that provides great reminders and coping strategies for children and adults. <http://www.mindful.org/>

Nature — Nature Explore provides research, collaborations, workshops, and resources to families and teachers about connecting to the natural world and becoming stewards of our environment. www.natureexplore.org/

Community — Hear Us website is a great way to learn more about homelessness through the voices of real people. The videos, books, and stories available on its website will help everyone see the courage of the 2.5 million children, youth, and families experiencing homelessness in everyone's community. www.hearus.us/

that new people are in the room. She allows him the time and space to begin interacting with the visitors in his own way. First he waves cautiously, then smiles, then begins to venture closer. Monique accepts whatever Charlie is feeling, offering a warm, nurturing presence at all times.

As an alumna of the program, Monique knows on a deeply personal level how important it is for children experiencing stress to have a nurturing adult completely accept and reflect whatever feelings are surfacing.

Teacher Dayana Juski, who works with four and five year olds, offered these thoughts: "It is my purpose to make children feel heard and respected when they are with me. I create a safe place for them to feel whatever they need to feel. I like to welcome all of them and be the light in their day."

Questions: How does your program encourage children to express their feelings? How comfortable are teachers with conflict as an opportunity for children to express emotion and feel accepted?

Strategy: Build Trust

Teacher's aide Andre King is outdoors with a group of toddlers. Children come over frequently to show him discoveries, give him a hug, or ask for help in negotiating something challenging. "You can go tell them what you want," he encourages one young boy. "I'll be here and I'll watch you." No matter what the request or need, Andre remains warm, attentive, and responsive.

"It's important to me," Andre says, "that children can always trust me. They need to know I'm always there for them and that I always care about them."

As program director, Maggie Rittenhouse believes one of her most important roles is to build trust with staff, families, and

Photo by Dex Lane



children. She makes it a priority to learn the names of all children and parents in the program and to develop trusting relationships with them. The same is equally true with each staff member.

Questions to consider: How are teachers intentionally developing trusting relationships with children? What is needed to help children feel a sense of trust? Is it a priority for the program director to form trusting relationships with not only staff, but children and families as well?

Strategy: Be Consistent

Maggie, on the value of consistency: "There is something very powerful about being the constant for children, families, and staff. To borrow an idea from writer Haim Ginott, I am the weather of the program — or at least it starts with me." Maggie realizes her daily actions influence whether the program has a consistently calm or stormy atmosphere. She strives for calm, knowing how vitally important it is for all children, but especially for the population she serves.

Teacher Dayana Juski on the value of routines: "Consistently knowing what to expect during the routines of the day is respectful of children. Many children, especially those who have experienced homelessness, don't associate surprises

with happiness or positive feelings, but rather [with] apprehension."

Questions: How can a program's director help set consistently calm 'weather'? Do teachers respect children's need for consistency by giving them warnings before transitions and discussing in advance whenever routines need to be changed?

Strategy: Help Children Connect with the Calming, Healing Power of Nature

Teacher Heather Anton on the immense value of daily connections with nature: "When we are inside under fluorescent lights all day long, it zaps our energy — children and adults alike. When we come outside, children dance in the wind, feel the snow, catch snowflakes in their hands. We created our outdoor space so they can move their bodies, be louder with their voices, and explore natural things. That is so important for children in our community, but it's also good for all children."

Teacher Liz O'Connell added: "The outdoors is so necessary because of the trauma that is part of children's lives. If they witnessed something upsetting last night, they need to be able to come outside to just relax and release. We try to come outside as much as possible."

Many teachers also talked about the value of sensory experiences in helping children cope with stressful feelings, and with having a place where children could enjoy the wonders of childhood, relax, and be totally playful.

Questions: Does your program have a natural outdoor space that children can explore on a regular basis? What ideas do you have for adding more sensory connections for children?

Strategy: Create a Feeling of Community

Teacher Dayana Juski: "I am very proud of our classroom because it is a community. Our children need that so much. We love each other and notice how each other is feeling. We build this sense by singing a greeting song in the morning. We cheer for each child by name when they are here. When someone is gone, we take a moment to close our eyes and send them love. Last week a child was absent and when he came back he told me, "When I had my pink eye at home, I felt you in my heart!"

Dayana knows that children who experience a sense of community learn to let others know when they need a hug, or help, or space. "The worst thing in life is not being able to communicate with others what we feel and need."

Questions: How are you developing a feeling of community in your program? How can you support children (and staff and families) in feeling safe enough to express what they really feel and need?

In a place where "all feelings are welcome," children, families, and staff can all experience the joy of being a part of an accepting, supportive, and encouraging community.

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