

Understanding the Impact of Early Childhood Experiences on Mental Health

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Welcome back to the National Adoption Competency Mental Health Training for Mental Health Professionals.

This lesson is: Understanding the Impact of Early Childhood Experiences on Mental Health.

1.2 Section 1: Lesson Objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- Understand how early life experiences and risk and protective factors impact a child's or youth's mental health and well-being, and
- Conduct assessment through an adoption and guardianship lens.

1.3 Exploring the Story

In the last lesson, we acknowledged that the problems children and youth experience are related to what occurred prior to placement.

Every child and youth has a unique history, family, and developmental profile, and it is essential that you understand their story and facilitate a deeper understanding of their past and/or reasons for their relinquishment, as well as any misinformation.

1.4 Important Aspects of Adoption Competent Assessment

Click each number to learn about the following aspects of adoption competent assessment.

1. The goal of a comprehensive adoption competent assessment is to integrate adoption-related information into a comprehensive developmental and family assessment.
2. Most clinicians understand this. What may be new to you is the way you weave adoption issues into your assessment questions.

3. Through this assessment, you will be seeking to gather more than a list of symptoms. As adoption researcher Michael Tarren Sweeney states:

"In essence, specialized assessments of these children requires a shift from a relatively narrow, "mechanical" focus on identifying children's symptoms and disorders - to seeking a comprehensive understanding of children's felt experience, their relationships, family [and] placement processes, and systemic and care-related influences on children's lives."

(Tarren-Sweeney, 2013, pp. 215-216)

1.5 ReMoved

Throughout this lesson, we will be viewing clips from *ReMoved*, which has won numerous short film awards.

This is the fictional gripping story of Zoe's journey through the foster care system. We will be weaving parts of her story throughout this lesson. Please keep her in mind as we examine the mental health needs of children and youth moving towards or having achieved permanency.

[Video Transcript]

[INAUDIBLE NOISES OF ADULTS ARGUING]

ZOE: Sometimes someone hurts you so bad, it stops hurting at all. Until something makes you feel again. And then it all comes back. Every word. Every hurt. Every moment. How could you ever understand where I come from? Even if you ask, even if you listen, you do not really hear or see or feel. You don't remember my story. You haven't walked my path. You haven't seen what I've seen.

[END OF VIDEO]

2. Factors Shaping Zoe's Adjustment

2.1 Factors Shaping Zoe's Adjustment

Let's begin to align our previous discussion of risk and protective factors with Zoe's case.

2.2 Reflecting on Zoe's Isolation

Zoe said, "How could you understand where I've come from? ... You haven't walked my path. You haven't seen what I've seen."

Take a minute to reflect on the deep sense of isolation Zoe feels.

Her need is to have someone give her a voice and a space in which to tell her story. This reinforces the work that lies ahead of us as therapists to help her tell her story and provide a space for her to be heard.

Helping Zoe use her voice will enable you to effectively understand both her past and the impact it will have on her behavior and emotional challenges ahead.

2.3 Zoe's Removal

Zoe was removed from her home because of chronic violence in the home, parental substance abuse, and inconsistent parenting which are all risk factors for a healthy development.

Let's watch this experience from Zoe's perspective, including her separation from her baby brother.

[Video Transcript]

[INAUDIBLE YELLING, POLICE ARRESTING MAN]

ZOE: It seemed like the same thing that held me up, forced me down. In a world turned upside down and order disappeared.

[YOUNG CHILD CRYING]

ZOE: Nothing was how it was supposed to be and a heavy sadness filled my soul.

[End of Video]

2.4 Zoe's Removal

Which of the following challenges might Zoe experience as a result of these risk factors?

- Compromised and Insecure Attachments
- Anxiety and Fears
- Sense of Insecurity
- Feeling Unsafe
- Challenging Behaviors
- Internalization of Feelings

2.5 Impact of Removal on Zoe

Most likely, Zoe would come into foster care with all of these challenges, as well as reactions to her broken attachments, particularly to her baby brother, whom she helped to parent.

3. Assessment

3.1 Assessment of Key Factors

Like Zoe, every child and youth you see has a unique history, family, and developmental profile. In order to thoroughly understand a child's mental health needs, and to work with caregivers and professionals to support them, you must first assess their unique history and current functioning.

3.2 Building the Story of the Child's or Youth's Unique History

As you begin your assessment, you will want to consider these areas of exploration. Click each checkbox on the left to learn more.

- The youth's understanding of why they came to be adopted and any historical information they have
- Information from the caregivers about the child's or youth's history, routines, strengths, and needs
- Information about the youth's relationships with significant others, to include teachers, other caregivers, siblings, and birth parents, if involved
- A thorough review of available records from placement agency
- History of previous treatment and medications

3.3 Information Gathering

Every mental health professional or system has its own policies about how assessments are conducted and what forms or standardized measures are used.

The information we are providing is not meant to supplant your usual protocol, but rather to enhance it. Please follow along with Handout: *Comprehensive Assessment Outline*, in the Resources tab, which delineates the information that is helpful to create that unique child picture.

Click each tab to learn more.

1. Birth and Development: It is important to gather and update information regarding:
 - Genetic risks
 - Prenatal and birth history, including risk factors
 - Developmental information
 - Health concerns
2. Preplacement and Placement Experiences: It is also important to have information on preplacement experiences, as well as their experiences in foster or orphanage care. Some of the key aspects include:
 - Birth family history, including prenatal information, quality of parenting, and reasons for a plan of adoption, entering foster care or orphanage care
 - Attachment history, including significant attachments, changes in caregivers, and attachment challenges

- Thorough trauma history, including all forms of neglect and abuse, exposure to violence, and significant losses
 - Placement experiences, be sure to chart out all moves, with dates and length of time in each placement
 - Child's key emotional concerns related to the past such as grief and loss, identity, and others
 - Child's or youth's attitudes about adoption and emotional concerns related to adoption
3. Child's or Youth's Current Functioning and Presenting Problems: It is important to have information about current functioning and presenting issues including:
- Developmental issues
 - Child's or youth's psychosocial functioning in different environments
 - High risk behaviors
 - Mental health functioning
 - Treatment history
 - Child's or youth's fears and concerns
 - Areas of strength
4. The Adoptive or Guardianship Family: Information about the adoptive and guardianship family is also important, including:
- Family composition and family functioning
 - Parents' motivation, expectations, and experiences in adoption process
 - Parents' experiences of grief and loss, including infertility
 - Parents' view of presenting problems
 - Relationship between birth and adoptive family over time
 - History of help-seeking
 - Marriage and co-parenting relationship
 - Sibling relationships
5. Environmental Factors:
- Family's formal and informal support system
 - Relationships with important systems
 - Extended family
 - School groups
 - Faith groups
 - Service systems
 - Neighbors
 - Experiences of unjust behavior or violence
 - Experiences with food insecurity or poverty
 - Exposure to environmental toxins and substance exposure

3.4 Multiple Informants

The assessment process is gathering information from multiple sources and over multiple points in time.

It is important to have multiple informants for three reasons:

1. Sometimes, the child or youth is not the best historian.
2. There are so many people involved with the child or youth that it creates multiple viewpoints of the child's story.
3. And, lastly, it is not uncommon for children and youth to express themselves differently in different settings and with different people.

You may be thinking that this is not different than for other children and youth you treat. However, with these children and youth you should also consider:

1. The impact of trauma on the child's or youth's memory or ability to recall events
2. Fragmented relationships due to multiple placements
3. Sometimes, more details of traumatic experiences will emerge as the child develops. Such disclosures warrant contacts with multiple informants to obtain the needed information for your assessment.

3.5 Key Developmental Issues

Clinicians should be aware throughout the treatment process of any issues that the child, family, and records do not document.

Doing so helps the clinician maintain an awareness that there are potential factors impacting the family that are not yet accounted for.

If the unknowns are not held in mind, they may be forgotten and aspects of the child's or youth's behavior and adjustment may be misunderstood.

4. Children's and Youth's Experiences Impact Their Mental Health

4.1 Children's and Youth's Experiences Impact Their Mental Health

Given that many of the adoptees you will be working with have histories of trauma, it is essential that we shift our focus to view their experience through the trauma lens.

The mantra: *"It's not what's wrong with you, but what has happened to you"* emphasizes that it is important to understand the impact of experiences to truly understand functioning and mental health needs.

4.2 The Immediate Impact

Like Zoe, most children and youth in foster care have endured prolonged difficulties and profound loss. And yet, removal from one's family and placement with unfamiliar people are also highly traumatic experiences that can further erode their sense of security and well-being.

Too often, emotions and behaviors are responses to experiences as children and youth attempt to cope with and survive such uncertainty and losses. Keeping this in mind, let's return to Zoe's story.

[Video Transcript]

ZOE: Trapped in the misery of my life. Lost in the sorrow of my soul. Unable to see the light. Unable to see the dawn. To feel. To hope.

FEMALE: What are you doing picking my fruit?

ZOE: To dream. And I found the darkest days of my life kept coming. The blackest nights for my soul never stopped. It seemed like it was always nighttime, nightmares, and never morning. And maybe you wonder why. But mostly you try not to think about it. And try to get by and try to survive.

[End of video]

4.3 Behaviors vs. Experiences

How would you interpret Zoe's behavior differently if you shift your focus from her behavior to her experiences? Please type your responses in the box below.

4.4 Behaviors vs. Experiences

You may have thought about these:

- Zoe feels angry and insecure, and rejects any attempts by her foster parent to create a sense of family.
- Zoe doesn't think anyone can understand how alone she feels, so she lashes out, rather than talking about her feelings.
- Zoe is used to parenting her brother and has lost the one thing she felt gave her purpose. She feels powerless and resorts to negative behavior to mask her feelings of sadness and loss.
- Zoe feels that nothing will change and that the uncertainty will continue.

It is important to remember how easily we can get pulled into just focusing on the adverse behaviors as we are assessing children like Zoe and lose sight of the experiences that may be stimulating these behaviors. Zoe wants to be heard, as do so many kids you will treat. It is through the story that healing will evolve.

5. The Impact of Loss, Trauma, and Inadequate Nurture

5.1 The Impact of Loss, Trauma, and Inadequate Nurture

In a moment, we'll talk about a framework for understanding the impact of loss, trauma, and inadequate nurture on children and youth, identifying four critical areas of functioning that are affected:

- Capacity for relationships
- Felt safety & control
- Self-regulation, and
- Identity and sense of self

Before we do, let's return to Zoe's story.

5.2 Zoe's Story

While watching, make note of how these critical areas of functioning are impacted by her experiences.

[Video transcript]

ZOE: And all the other stuff seems so much like nothing compared to just wanting the most important things back again. Like wishing you could see your mama's smile again, and hear her singing that one favorite song that always calmed you down when things were all messed up. Or if you couldn't have her back at least get to take care of your baby brother.

Because you know he needs you. He's going to be so scared all alone. And who's going to hold his hand and whisper, "It'll be all right," to him? And who will whisper it to me?

FEMALE: Hi, Zoe. So good to have you here. Are you ready to come in?

ZOE: I know I'm helpless, dependent, desperate. But what happens when those you need the most threaten your very existence? I've heard plenty of promises, and they all sound the same. But push hard enough and sooner or later they all prove to be empty.

The sun comes up every morning, but do you know where? Each place it's somewhere different. It's hard to find East when you keep moving around, but at least it comes. It always comes. I've come to depend on that.

[End of Video]

5.3 Assess Loss, Trauma, and Inadequate Nurture for Zoe

Based on what you have seen of Zoe's life at this point, what do you see as significant examples of loss, trauma, and inadequate nurture?

5.4 Examples of Loss, Trauma, and Inadequate Nurture for Zoe

Click each shape to hear some examples of loss, trauma, and inadequate nurture in Zoe's life.

1. Loss: Some examples of loss may include:
 - Her parents
 - Her baby brother
 - Her home
 - Familiar surroundings
 - Her belongings
 - Her sense of security
 - Her sense of responsibility for her brother
 - Her sense of control
 - Her sense of place in the world
2. Trauma: Traumas include:
 - Witnessing violence in the home.
 - Physical abuse from her father, as indicated by bruises on her eyes and cut lip.
 - Separation trauma from removal.
3. Inadequate Nurture was likely related to:
 - Substance abuse in family
 - Parent's failure to protect Zoe

5.5 Impact of Loss, Trauma, and Inadequate Nurture

The framework for understanding children's and youth's behaviors in the context of their experiences can be found in Handout: *Four Areas of Functioning Challenged by the Impact of Loss, Trauma, and Inadequate Nurture*. It includes salient goals for children and their parents.

Click on the numbers on your screen to learn more.

1. Capacity for Relationships: Capacity for relationships is the ability to develop close emotional relationships with others...to love and be loved. Securely attached children and youth have a sense of safety, the capacity for empathy, a sense of worth, and the foundation for a conscience.

Children and youth with deprived beginnings distrust others and learn to protect themselves from closeness, which they associate with pain and loss. For Zoe, this includes her lack of trust of caregivers, feelings of insecurity, and her pushing away of others when becoming too close. In her words, "Those you need the most threaten your very existence."

2. **Felt Safety and a Sense of Personal Control:** Felt safety and a sense of personal control involves a sense of security and a belief that one's own efforts can make things better; that one is not simply a victim. Well-nurtured children and youth feel secure and a sense that they can have an impact on their world - "the master of one's fate." They feel confident that if they voice their needs, they will be met.

Children who are poorly nurtured and traumatized feel vulnerable and afraid, powerless to control the direction of their lives, and feel like their wishes and needs don't matter. Zoe was insecure and fearful of being let down again; she felt she couldn't depend on others. She tried to handle things on her own but couldn't protect herself or her baby brother.

3. **Self-Regulation:** The ability to regulate one's own behaviors and emotions is an outcome of maturational processes stemming from the complex interplay between parent-child attachment and brain development. Each fuels the other. Well-nurtured children and youth develop the capacity for empathy and the ability to read cues and respond accordingly. Other developmental processes related to self-regulation are the use of language to express feelings and the development of social skills.

Poorly-nurtured children and youth lack the emotional connection to others that is the foundation for the development of empathy and self-control. They may have effects of maltreatment that impair the parts of the brain that control impulses and allow for reason and consideration of consequences. For Zoe, this manifested in her acting out when she felt angry or scared.

4. **Identity or Sense of Self:** Our sense of self is derived from the messages we receive from the external world and our own inner interpretation of life events. Well-nurtured children and youth receive positive external messages that become internalized and help to build a feeling of self-worth and positive self-concept.

Children and youth experiencing maltreatment often see themselves as responsible for what has happened to them and struggle with feelings of rejection related to not being "kept" or protected by birth parents. They also may feel a sense of stigma related to adoption or foster care--that they are second class and fundamentally different from other children. For Zoe, it is unlikely that she received many positive messages about herself; her father's abuse and her parent's inability to protect her conveyed her lack of being valued. See the handout in the Resources tab for more information.

5.6 Supporting Adoption Stability Reflection

As we continue to think about how the child's or youth's beginnings impact their current functioning, our work needs to focus on helping parents to understand their child's behaviors, considering their history. Be cautious not to let parents minimize the past and the importance of its relationship to current behaviors.

Let's now return to Zoe and think back to her story and the coping skills she used. After Zoe picked the fruit off the tree without permission, and destroyed the stereo after being disciplined, what might you say to the parent(s) to help them understand what is underlying the behavior? Please note, we are aware that Zoe was removed from the foster or adoptive family, but for the purposes of this exercise, let's assume you are helping the family understand her behavior. Write your statement below.

5.7 Supporting Adoption Stability Response

Here is an example to help guide your interaction with parents:

FOSTER PARENT: I'm angry that Zoe takes things that are not hers and purposely destroyed our property. If this continues, she is going to have to leave.

THERAPIST: I know you are really angry that Zoe picked an apple from your tree without asking you and then damaged your stereo after you disciplined her. For kids like Zoe it's hard for them to know what the rules are without being told.

FOSTER PARENT: Kids should know they have to ask permission to take things. And to make matters worse, she threw the stereo out to get back at us for punishing her. Her behavior is out of control.

THERAPIST: I understand that you felt disrespected. It might help to understand a little bit about Zoe's experiences. Zoe has been abused. She was physically removed from her family, separated from her brother, and is now living with a family who are strangers to her. She feels powerless and may not have the words to express her loss of control, sadness, and frustration.

Additionally, while you may feel like certain rules are universal, they are not, especially for someone who has had a very different family experience. It is really important for you to understand that Zoe's actions are not intended to hurt you. She is acting out her very intense feelings. I would like to help you with a better understanding of Zoe and some parenting and discipline strategies that are more effective and appropriate with children who have experienced loss, trauma, and inadequate nurture.

FOSTER PARENT: I never thought about that from Zoe's perspective. I do think we could use some help with strategies and conversations with Zoe to help her feel more comfortable with us.

Please note: While we didn't address the inappropriate discipline in this scenario, it would be important for you to also help the parent understand that placing a child in the shower as a punishment is not appropriate and could result in removal of a child and loss of licensure.

5.8 Traumas and Losses May Continue

Often as children and youth begin the healing process, additional traumas and losses happen to them.

For example, they may lose a foster or adoptive placement where they felt accepted or may lose relationships with peers or significant others who are primary supports. They may lose significant connections to their heritage and/or supportive community.

When these continue for many years, it is common for youth to become even more resistant to trusting and attaching and feel even more hopeless, powerless, and full of rage.

5.9 Zoe's Additional Traumas and Losses Video

For Zoe, there were some positive experiences which helped her begin to heal such as accepting nurture from a sensitive foster parent and having her baby brother join her in that home.

However, she also experienced two major blows. Let's look at this clip from *ReMoved 2* to understand how Zoe experienced these additional traumas and losses.

[Video Transcript]

MOM: What are you working on in school?

ZOE: Homework.

MOM: Do you still like to draw? I always liked your drawings. I love you, you know? Hey, I love you and I'm going to fight to get Beniah back. My mom never fought for us, but I'm going to fight for him.

ZOE: What about me? Don't you want me too?

MOM: Of course. I just--you're not a kid anymore. You're all grown up.

ZOE: Oh, where's Kira?

FEMALE: She had to leave early.

ZOE: Oh. Beniah! Beniah! Beniah! Beniah!

FOSTER MOM: Zoe. Zoe, wait. Zoe. No, listen. Zoe, it happened so quickly. They wouldn't let me tell you.

ZOE: When I finally come close, it starts all over again.

[End of Video]

5.10 Zoe's Additional Traumas and Losses

As you can see from this clip, Zoe knew that her mother was willing to fight for her brother, but not her. The second loss was the removal of her baby brother, Beniah, from her foster home without her knowledge or adequate preparation.

As a therapist, when working with children in foster care or adoptive and guardianship placements, you will need to continually assess for additional traumas and losses that occur.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Wrapping Up

Understanding the child's or youth's unique story and experiences is the first and most important step in meeting their mental health needs.

This requires a thorough assessment, infused with an adoption competency lens of the child and family, identification of risk and protective factors, and understanding the child in the context of their family, beliefs, values, and community.

6.2 Your Journal

Please click on the journal page to write down your reflections on this lesson.

6.3 Journal Reflection

Reflecting on this lesson, what are your key takeaways and how might you apply these in your practice?

6.4 Journal Response

Click the "Print Results" button to print and save your answers.

6.5 Conclusion

Congratulations! You have completed Understanding the Impact of Early Childhood Experiences on Mental Health.

In the next lesson, we will look at practice strategies for accessing the inner voice of the child and helping them to process and integrate their life story.