Last month’s newsletter focused on trauma and some key facts regarding brain development. Taking that information a step further, what can you do to best support the children in your classroom, especially those that have experienced trauma. Below are some ideas to keep in mind and incorporate in your room:

- Maintain consistent routines: consistency and predictability will send the message that the child is safe and provides feelings of normalcy
- Give children choices: often traumatic events involve loss of control and/or chaos, so you can help children feel safe by providing them with some choices or control when appropriate
- Provide consistent support and encouragement and increase if needed
- Set clear, firm, limits for inappropriate behavior and develop logical, rather than punitive, consequences
- Recognize that behavioral concerns may be related to the trauma: remember that even the most disruptive behaviors can be driven by trauma-related anxiety
- Be sensitive to the cues in the environment that may cause a reaction to the child (ex. a child who has experienced a storm related disaster may react very badly to threatening weather or storm warnings): children may increase problem behaviors near an anniversary of the traumatic event
- Anticipate difficult times and provide additional support
- Warn children if you will be doing something out of the ordinary
- Understand that children may re-enact trauma through their play or interactions with others
- Don’t expect children to be able to make good decisions, remain calm, and consider others’ feelings all the time: if you do, you’re setting them (and yourself) up for failure as their “upstairs” brain is under construction and at times they simply can’t access it
- Learn to recognize when a child’s stairway from the “downstairs” brain to the “upstairs” brain is blocked by strong reactions: experiences of fear, danger, anger, and trauma can overwhelm and block a child’s access to the functions of that part of the brain
- Be attuned to the child and recognize what part of their brain is controlling their actions
Feeling boards are visuals that could be incorporated into your daily schedule. It could be done as children arrive, group time, or during a daily routine that best works for your classroom. Using a feelings board would help move the children from knowing the names of different feelings to being able to identify which particular emotion they are experiencing. This is a crucial step in children learning to regulate their emotions. Additionally, hearing how other children or teachers in the room are feeling will also help with the development of empathy.

The most valuable things that you can do as teachers is name your own feelings, name other’s feelings, model empathy, and allow children to experience all feelings (especially those that are seen as negative). Below are some additional activities that can be incorporated into the classroom to work on this important skill:

- Practice identifying emotions by guessing the expressions of people in books. You could also make various faces and ask the children to identify what you are feeling. For the younger children, you can label the feelings. Even with infants you can practice labeling emotions. Similarly, you and the children in the room can practice making different feeling faces in front of a mirror.

- Pretend play/dramatic play is one of the best ways for children to learn perspective taking. Switch up your dramatic play area to provide the children with greater variety of opportunities to play and practice this skill. You can also help to gently guide children’s play to encourage empathy.

- Draw different eyes and mouths on plastic eggs (eyes on one piece and a mouth on the other) that the kids can mix and match to create faces they believe represent particular feelings. The activity could be taken a step further and the kids could be asked to put a face together to identify how they would feel in a situation or how another child could feel.

- Read books that teach acceptance and empathy. Some options would include:
  - “Chrysanthemum”
  - “The Sneetches”
  - “It’s Okay to be Different”
  - “Hey Little Ant”
  - “Horace and Morris but Mostly Delores”
  - “Bear Feels Sick”
  - “Chocolate Milk, Por Favor”
  - “The Invisible Boy”
  - “Those Shoes”
  - “Crabby Pants”
  - “Amos and Boris”
  - “The Monster Who Lost His Mean”
  - “Enemy Pie”

- You (or children) could sing songs covering your mouth. This will result in a muffled voice. The children can then guess what song it is that is being sung.

Resources

For more information and additional resources and videos on childhood trauma, the impact on brain development, and interventions check out:  
www.childtrauma.org