

## **What you will learn in this module**

### **How to recognize the signs of trauma and loss in young children**

Early exposure to trauma has serious consequences for children. It changes the structure and chemistry of the brain. Teachers can learn to recognize the symptoms of these changes. Then they can help children overcome the problems they face.

### **How to care for children exposed to trauma and loss**

Trauma is a reaction to any event that overwhelms a child's ability to cope. It is not the event itself. Caring adults can reduce the effects of trauma. Their support gives children back their sense of safety and control.

### **How to create a trauma-sensitive environment**

Every early childhood setting has children who have experienced trauma and loss. When teachers observe the environment through "trauma-sensitive" eyes they can anticipate the needs of traumatized children. Then they are able to support children's growth and development.

## **You already know a lot about how to help children manage loss and grief**

### **You know how to recognize the signs of stress in children.**

You know that changes in children's behavior are often the first sign of stress. Acting out, crying, or behaving in ways that are more typical of younger children signal that something is wrong. When teachers recognize these signs and offer reassurance, children feel better. A teacher's support gives them the confidence they need to continue to play and grow.

Traumatic experiences also cause changes in children's behavior. Common sources of trauma include domestic violence, abuse, absence, and the loss of a parent. These can cause language delays, poor attention, and an inability to self-regulate. Teachers need to understand the effects of trauma on children's development. Then they can help them gain the resilience they need.

### **You know how to care for children with a variety of emotional needs.**

You know that some children need help learning to manage their emotions and behavior. Some need to learn how to ask for help. Or to express themselves using words. Others need to become more aware of the thoughts and feelings of others.

Trauma leaves children with a constant need for safety and reassurance. It may be difficult for them to trust caregivers. They may appear aggressive or rejecting when, in fact, they are afraid. Clear expectations and consistent routines help restore their sense of safety.

**You know that enriching early childhood experiences have a positive effect on at risk children.**

Participation in quality early childhood programs gives children a secure base. Positive relationships with teachers help them feel safe. These experiences build their self- confidence and help them meet challenges.

There are similar benefits for children struggling to manage the effects of trauma and loss. With teacher support they are able to manage their stress. They discover new interests and skills.

 **What do you think?**

Salvator's dad recently died. He and his mother had to give up their apartment and move in with his grandparents. His mother is working two jobs and isn't as available to Salvator as she was when her husband was alive. He is having frequent temper tantrums, both at home and at preschool. Salvator's teacher wants to help him get control of his behavior and feel better. *What would you tell her?*

- (a) Use time-out as a consequence for tantrums.
- (b) Teach him ways to calm himself so he doesn't have a tantrum.
- (c) Give Salvator a reward for every hour he doesn't have a tantrum.

The correct answer is (b). Teaching children how to calm down and self-soothe is the best way to prevent tantrums.

### **Trauma and relationships**

Children's early relationships with caregivers play an extremely important role in their development. Consistent, predictable care helps children feel safe and secure. The caregiver's support and encouragement helps them learn how to get their needs met. They gain control of themselves and their environment. The safer they feel, the easier it is for them to explore and learn. They think of themselves as competent. They are free to explore their own interests. They are usually easy to get along with and are well liked by peers.

Trauma can seriously damage children's attachment relationships with their caregivers.

Young children need their caregivers to be constantly available. They need their steady support to help them recover from the stress of learning new things. Children's brains are wired so they naturally seek and cling to their parents or other primary caregivers. When her parents aren't available a child becomes confused. Her brain sets off a 'freeze,

