

Immigration and Trauma

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What is Trauma?

Trauma is Different than Stress

Trauma: Definition

- An exceptional experience in which powerful and dangerous events overwhelm the child's capacity to cope and regulate emotions (Early Trauma Treatment Network)
- A child's perception of trauma varies by age and developmental stage

Traumatic Experiences in Early Childhood

- Abuse and neglect
- Witnessing domestic violence
- Exposure to community violence
- Immigration
- Terrorism, war
- Natural disasters
- Life threatening medical conditions or acute episodes of chronic illness
- Exposure to other traumatic events (dog bites, accidents, painful medical procedures)

Cielo Juan and Nora

Background Information

- Eleven y.o. girl from Guatemala, lives with her parents in Boston
- Father works as a cook, mother is a homemaker
- The family speaks Spanish at home; parents not proficient in English
- Emigrated to the U.S. with mother at age 6.6, after a violent home invasion; reunited with father after 5 years of separation

Reason for Referral

- Child witnessed a brutal attack upon her maternal grandmother in Guatemala.
- After arrival in the U.S. child was referred to CWVP by social worker at family's health center
- Concerns about child's behavior and the long term impact of traumatic incident. Parents requested support regarding how to help and talk to child
- Family began receiving services at CWVP when child was 7 y.o.

Presenting Problem

- Upon presentation child exhibited:
- Hyper-alertness; exaggerated startle response; ready to flee
 - Difficulties separating from mother; overprotective; extremely worried and anxious
 - New fears: Adult males including father, strangers, new places
 - Rejected physical proximity with father
 - Reluctant to going to school: Felt rejected by other children
 - Regression: Forgot colors, letters
 - Avoidance: Forgot familiar names and places in Guatemala
 - Difficulties concentrating
 - Demanding, oppositional
 - Aggressiveness, irritability and anger outbursts
 - Somatic symptoms: stomachache and nausea

History of Presenting Problem

- No symptoms prior to attack
- No exposure to violence prior to attack
- No physical or sexual abuse prior to or during incident
- Right after the incident did not cry or expressed emotion
- During first 3-4 months after the incident talked constantly about it and drew pictures of it

Family History

- Nora 37 y.o.- SW by training
- Juan 31 y.o.- didn't finish elementary school; joined the army
- Nora and Juan married for 10 years
- Nora 2 miscarriages before Cielo
- Intergenerational history of domestic violence, child abuse and neglect: Nora and Juan severely maltreated as children
- Family history positive for difficulties related to attention and learning as well as for PTSD, depressive and anxiety symptoms

Family's Sociocultural Context

- Where did individuals/family come from?
 - Nora: Born and raised in Guatemala city, self-identifies as white, low-middle class, owned the home where she lived with Cielo
 - Juan: Born in a poor rural setting, self-identifies as "campesino" and a minority; ran away from abusive family at age 11. Some members of his family were victims of ethnic violence

Sociocultural Context (Cont.)

What motivated/forced them to leave the country of origin?

- Juan: Find a job, save money
- Nora and Cielo: Safety

Sociocultural Context (Cont.)

- How did they get to the U.S.?
 - Juan: Paid a "Coyote" to smuggle him across the border. Trip was dangerous and difficult
 - Cielo and Nora: Trip was sudden and forced. Came with a tourist visa that has expired

Sociocultural Context (Cont.)

- What is their environment like now? Protective and Risk factors
 - "We feel more protected but not safe"
 - Family reunited, Nora and Cielo protected by dad
 - Better health and educational services for Cielo
 - Health center main source of support
 - Loss of extended family and same cultural group
 - Loss of social status and work for Nora
 - Fears of discrimination, racism
 - Financial needs
 - Immigration Status: Impacts safety, quality of life
 - Difficulty accessing services/No fluency in English
 - Isolation

Developmental History

- Planned pregnancy. Delivered via forceps after a healthy full-term pregnancy.
- Suffered fetal distress; was kept in the NICU for a week
- Infancy notable for colic and involuntary limb movements not associated with seizure disorder
- Reached all early developmental milestones WNL
- No developmental concerns

Educational History

- At time of referral attending 1st grade at a regular public elementary school setting
- Resistance to going to school; did not understand English, difficulties making friends. Teacher described her as motivated, cooperative but extremely shy.

Mental Health/Medical History

- Was evaluated by a psychologist in Guatemala after attack. Did not receive therapy
- History of asthma and allergies
- History of stomach pain and nausea

Intake/Assessment Phase

- Involved individual, couple and family sessions
- Clinical tools used: Structured interviews; observation of child play and child-parent interactions; parent questionnaires; child projectives
- Contact with collaterals

Initial Impressions

- Caregivers' Functioning
 - Nora
 - Juan
 - Juan and Nora

Initial Impressions

- Child's Functioning
 - Initially very cautious
 - Once comfortable, funny, engaging, good eye contact
 - Experiencing overwhelming fears, anxiety and concerns related to loss of loved ones, body integrity
 - Aggressive and demanding behavior used as a way of maintaining control
 - Symptoms associated with PTSD: avoidance, hyperalertness, regression

Initial Impressions

- Child-parents relationship
 - Constant sense of guilt in caregivers for not protecting. Conflict on their ability to set limits and provide opportunities for exploration and independence
 - Caregivers unable to help Cielo to assess danger and safety in environment :World dangerous place
 - Cielo and Nora overprotective of each other , father left out
 - Cielo's loss other attachment figures, loss of caregivers as reliable protectors; experiencing contradictory feelings but anger directed to Dad

Prominent Issues

- Impact of traumatic event in all family members and their relationship
- Impact of migration after the traumatic event
 - Adjustment to social transplantation-complicated by isolation
 - Dramatic changes in the structure and dynamic of the family
 - Family's level of stress and difficulties meeting basic needs
- Impact of mother's depression and anxiety on child
- Concerns related to child's affective difficulties, reduced self-esteem

Treatment

Phase I

- Family's Stabilization/Safety
 - Advocacy and referral: Food pantry, legal services, mental health services for caregivers, ESL program for mother, sheltered class for Cielo
 - Family Sessions: Support family to express and work through feelings regarding trauma and adjustment to a new family structure
 - Individual sessions with parents :Developmental guidance, process questions, concerns aroused by family sessions

Treatment

Phase II

- Increase Cielo's ability to identify and express feelings, fantasies, fears through different strategies
 - Weekly individual play therapy
 - Ongoing developmental guidance with caregivers
 - Once a month family sessions

Treatment

Phase III

- Develop coping skills to assist Cielo in managing her anxiety and increasing sense of competence
 - Individual therapy: breathing, relaxation imagery, verbalization, planning
 - Developmental guidance with caregivers: Identify triggers, and soothing activities
 - Advocacy: Worked closely with school in promoting her self-esteem; referral to neuropsych evaluation

New Bedford Raids

- In March of 2007, the Department of Homeland Security launched a worksite enforcement operation on Michael Bianco Inc. in New Bedford
 - 361 immigrants were arrested
 - 113 children were abruptly separated from their parents; 71 were younger than 6 y.o. Some were placed in temporary custody of DCF

Countertransference

- Helpless, hopeless, defeated, angry, sad, and extremely guilty

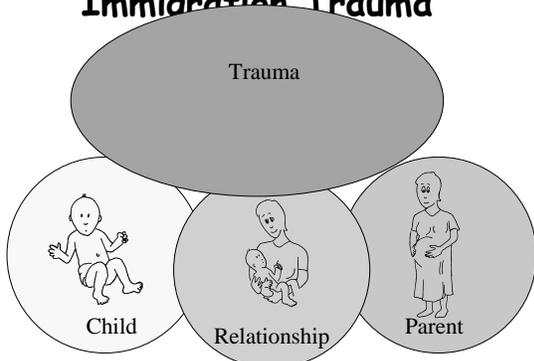
What to do?

- Supervision
- Gathered information through reliable channels
- Networked with other professionals serving immigrants
- Offered home visits to Cielo's family

Strategies of Intervention with the Family

- Learn the facts
- Stabilization and safety
 - Provide advocacy and information to family
 - Help family to develop a safety plan
 - Know where you are referring your clients
 - Encourage them to establish connections with community organizations to avoid isolation and learn about their rights
 - Don't do it alone: Supervision, consultation
 - Advocate for change at policy level: Increase awareness through presentations, writing articles, etc.

Immigration Trauma





The attachment system is the main organizer of children's responses to danger and safety in the first years of life, the best way to help children is to help their parents to feel safe
