

Topic: Build skills to promote child development and learning and lead to life and school success.

Perry, D. F., & Conners-Burrow, N. (2016). Addressing early adversity through mental health consultation in early childhood settings. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Studies*, 65, 24-36.

Context

Research indicates that the link between exposure to stress and longer term negative impacts is mitigated by the presence of a nurturing adult caregiver (Shonkoff, Boyce, & McEwen, 2009). Literature on resilience shows that having at least one competent caregiver and learning adaptive coping skills can foster resilience in children exposed to early adversity (Masten, 2001). Early childhood mental health consultation (ECMHC) can support the ability of caregivers and parents to nurture and teach coping skills to young children exposed to or at high risk for early adversity.

Purpose of Article

This article focuses on the advantages of using best practices from the field of early childhood mental health consultation (ECMHC) as a strategy to help reduce the impact of stressors on young children.

Early Childhood Mental Health Consultation (ECMHC)

Implementation of ECMHC involves teaming a mental health professional with an EC provider to embed mental health expertise into the settings and services that serve young children and their families (Cohen & Kaufmann, 2000, 2005; Donohue, Falk, & Provet, 2000). Research suggests that this type of integrated intervention can improve outcomes for vulnerable children. In child care, ECMHC seeks to improve children's social emotional well-being through positive changes made in the EC environment and through the acquisition of new skills by the EC teachers. Consultants build teachers' capacity to engage in positive adult-child interactions with children, encourage teachers to spend time talking and listening to children, prompt them to follow the child's play

lead, and show their enjoyment at being with the children.

ECMHC for Children in Foster Care

For children with a history of trauma, consultants support teachers in developing positive discipline techniques and discourage the use of punishment to guide children's behavior. Consultants help teachers understand the connection between children's experiences with trauma and their behavior in the classroom. Recognizing that children who have experienced trauma may have delays in their social and emotional skills, they help teachers learn strategies for modeling and direct teaching of these skills.

Positive Results Reported

Empirical support for ECMHC in child care comes from several reviews of published and unpublished literature. Brennan, Bradley, Allen, & Perry (2008) identified 26 studies that reported data on the effectiveness of ECMHC in helping increase staff self-efficacy/competence and confidence in dealing with troubling or difficult behaviors of young children in their care. In several studies, staff who received consultation support had improved sensitivity and lower job-related stress. In addition, consultation helped improve overall quality of early care and education settings and was linked to reduced staff turnover.

Discussion

Often, exposure to early traumatic experiences leads to additional adversities, such as separation from parents and placement in foster care. Unfortunately, the systems designed to protect children often inflict additional traumas on children in the form of disruptions to children's

developing relationships, such as multiple foster placements and school or child care changes. It is critical that mental health services are integrated into early childhood settings to build resilience in high-risk children and families.

How to Use This Article

For Instructors and Practitioners

It would be beneficial for instructors to list the strategies mentioned in this article that were taught to early childhood professionals by mental health consultants and for learners to link them to the DEC Recommended Practices retrieved from <http://www.dec-sped.org/dec-recommended-practices>

References

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Research-to-Practice Briefs provide summaries of key studies that inform practice related to early childhood special education. The series is designed specifically to support community college faculty who prepare candidates to work with children with special needs in the early childhood setting.

About the ACCEPT Project

The ACCEPT (Advancing Community College Efforts in Paraprofessional Training) Project is a federally-funded cooperative agreement between the U. S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the University of North Carolina at Charlotte College of Education. The focus of this effort is the inclusion of special education content in the coursework and experiences provided within the associate degree program in early childhood education at targeted state-supported community colleges in North Carolina.

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