Promotion of Social-Emotional Well-being of Children Exposed to Political Conflict/Adversity

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Significance

- Children have the right to thrive, to a healthy development, and to be protected from political conflicts and violence.

- Early exposure to <u>conflict has negative consequences</u> for long-term developmental outcomes.

- Compelling evidence from prevention science, economics, neuroscience, psychology in support of **long-term benefits of investing in early childhood.**

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(Durlak et al., 2011; Maxwell et al., 2004; McCoy, Raver, & Sharkey, 2015; Yoshikawa, 2014).

Significance . . .

- ⛭ Sustainability and peace are possible when <u>foundations for tolerance, inclusion, and responsible citizenship</u> are laid in early years.

- ⛭ **Young children depend on external support to develop positive beliefs, thoughts, and behaviors**.

CASEL, 2013; Cummings et al., 2013; UNICEF, 2015).

Exposure to Conflict/Violence

♦ Recent <u>refugee crisis</u> is leading thousands of children to be displaced every month – with numerous consequences for their well-being.

♦ In 2014, about 230 million were exposed to political conflict.

♦ In 2011 alone, 37 political conflicts were recorded worldwide.

♦ In 2014, 23 countries violated children's rights due to political conflict.

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(Maxwell et al., 2004; McCoy, et al., 2015; Mertan & Husnu, 2014)

Exposure to Conflict Changes Understanding of Social Contexts

- It leads to **Social Isolation** that stems from **'othering'** - treating our own experiences differently than others' experience.

- Seeing 'self' as the victim and others as 'aggressors.'

- The way we **make meaning changes**, where actions of 'my' group are seen as justifiable and appropriate but not those of the 'others.'

Exposure to Conflict

Gives rise to fear

- Once fearful, people tend to turn more to othering.
- Creates distance, suspicion, and lack of empathy.

Effects of Exposure to Conflict on Children's Overall Well-being

- Exposure to conflict takes up most of children's <u>physical</u> and <u>psychological resources</u> and coping capacities, leaving limited capacity to engage in positive developmental activities.

(Davies, Woitach, Winter, & Cummings, 2008; UNICEF, 2015)

Effects of Exposure to Conflict on
Children's Adjustment

✸Children may become hypersensitive to stress or blunted in their reaction

- ♦ **Externalizing problems**
  - Aggression
  - Conduct problems

- ♦ **Internalizing problems**
  - Depression
  - Psychological distress

(Cummings, et al., 2013; Cummings et al., 2014; Jones & Bouffard, 2012)

Effects of Exposure to Conflict on Children's Stress Response

- **Children experience the negative impact of political conflict in the same manner as they experience other stressors.**

- Frequent or prolonged threats trigger high levels of <u>anxiety,</u> <u>heightened insecurity</u>, and perceptions of the world as an <u>unsafe</u> and <u>threatening place</u>.

(McCoy, Raver, & Sharkey, 2015; Stirling et al., 2008).

Evidence from Neuroscience

⚙ Exposure to adversity including poverty and violence <u>interferes with brain development</u>.

⚙ Early stressful experiences <u>alter the neural pathways</u> of the brain.

But, we also know:

⚙ **Early years are greatly malleable** – the negative effects can be reversed.

⚙ There is great potential for improvement

(McCoy, Raver, & Sharkey, 2015; Stirling et al., 2008).

What do Children Need Under Such Circumstances?

A sense of safety, security and predictability

- **SEL Skills** to successfully navigate their environment
- **High quality** ECD programs
- **Well managed** classrooms
- **Nurturing** Adults

Stories and Types of Play

That Promote The Well-being of Children Exposed to Conflict

Stories **That Promote These Children's Well-being**

- Stories that allow children to relate with their life's experiences

- Open-ended stories
  - Draw upon children's lived experiences
  - Give them spaces to voice their thoughts and ideas
  - Make several different endings possible

- Stories that
  - Help children to deal with difficult emotions
  - Teach social-emotional learning skills

Story-telling to Promote These Children's Well-being

- Every story does not have a happy ending, especially for children who have been exposed to conflict.

- Many times we focus on making everything right - that is not always possible in real life.

- There has to be a space to acknowledge loss and all other emotional experiences.

Types of Play to Promote Children's Well-being

- Unstructured free play
- Dramatic play
- Sandbox with familiar objects and materials
- Drawing/coloring

- **Option** to share

Role of Adults

- Understand what children from high adversity environments are GOOD at.

- Build on children's unique strengths.

- Translate what we know WORKS in ways that are contextually appropriate.

- Find ways to integrate SEL skill building throughout the day.

- Create opportunities for practice of specific skills.

- **Be actively engaged in understanding their own skills and competencies (training; professional development).**

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