

Increasing Parent-Child Involvement at a Battered Women's Shelter Utilizing Family Fun-Times Activities

Report to Madeline's House

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The Madeline's House family fun time project was conducted through Longwood University as an honors enhancement for the Sociology Family Violence Course. I began this project at the beginning of the semester by approaching Madeline's House about facilitating activities for parent-child involvement in the shelter. Going into this project, I was aware that the children in the shelter have experienced adverse childhood experiences, and both the children and the adults have experienced trauma. The purpose of making these activities was to facilitate parent-child interaction, involvement, and attachment to foster safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments that minimize the effects of ACEs and trauma. While designing the activities I made sure to use a trauma informed practice lens that encompassed principles of trauma informed care such as trustworthiness, encouragement/empowerment, collaboration, choice, and respect of cultural, historical, and gender issues. In this report I will discuss the processes and considerations in developing activities suitable for parents and children at a domestic violence shelter.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES), trauma, and trauma-informed practice guided the construction of the activities for client families at Madeline's House. Adverse childhood experiences (also known as ACEs) are non normative experiences that can happen in a child's life (CDC, 2019, b). Adverse childhood experiences are defined as follows:

ABUSE:

- Emotional Abuse
- Physical Abuse
- Sexual Abuse

NEGLECT

- Emotional Neglect
- Physical Neglect

HOUSEHOLD DYSFUNCTION/CHALLENGES

- Mother treated violently
- Household substance abuse

- Mental illness in household
- Parental separation or divorce
- Incarcerated household member

A longitudinal research project conducted by the CDC and Kaiser Permanente of 17,000 Health Maintenance Organization members examined the relationship between exposure to ACEs in childhood and adult health and well-being (CDC, 2019, b). The researchers found that there was a positive correlation between between ACEs and increased health and social problems in adulthood, including obesity, alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, anxiety, suicide, unsafe sex, HIV/AIDS, unintended pregnancy, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and cancer. Additionally, the researchers found that the more ACEs a person has as a child, the greater number of health and social problems in adulthood, which is known as a dose response (CDC, 2019, b).

The children at Madeline's House are known to have or have likely experienced several ACEs, including their mother being treated violently, and parental separation or divorce. Additionally, children also may have experienced an incarcerated household member as a result of the domestic violence. Given the high incidence of substance use in families where intimate partner violence occurs, children at Madeline's House also may have experienced parental substance abuse. Although not formally considered an ACE in the study, another adversity the children at Madeline's House have experiences is relocation.

The CDC (2019, c) defines trauma as an event or experience that causes extreme stress. ACEs are a form of trauma because they are both an adverse experience that elicits a negative physical or emotional response. Trauma and ACEs affect children's: development, ability to regulate their emotions, and trouble with attachment (being overly or inadequately attached)

Burke and Ghayour (2018) draw an analogy that explains what the stress response is of a person or child who has gone through adverse childhood experiences. The researchers compare the stress response to having a bear living in your house everyday. The person's body never shuts off its fear response because they are in a constant state of fear and panic. When children experience these non normative events, it can impact normal child development because when a person experiences traumatic events for an extended period of time their stress response may be continuously activated.

Rudenstine, Espinosa, McGee, and Routhier, 2018 mention that children who experience trauma may have a hard time regulating their emotions because they have to quickly adapt to the aftermath of the traumatic event. Children express different types of maladaptive emotions including "avoidance, negative emotions, anxiety, self-destructive behaviors, maladaptive cognitions, behavioral difficulties, emotional suppression, and/or erratic emotional responses"

(Rudenstine, Espinosa, McGee, & Routhier, 2018). These all stem from children trying to cope and compartmentalize the stress caused by their trauma.

TRAUMA INFORMED PRACTICE AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES

The three principles of trauma informed practice that I focussed on were: collaboration, choice and encouragement.

- Collaboration: The process of collaborating with Madeline's House helped me develop activities that addressed the symptoms of trauma that staff see in children at the shelter, particularly problems with emotion regulation. From various meetings I was able to use their input to make activities that they felt fulfilled the needs of the population.
- Choice: To capture the aspect of choice, I have alternative activities for each age group. From a conversation with the staff at Madeline's House, it was recommended that the parents and children be provided with as much choice as possible since so much control has been taken from their life through family violence. Having the power to choose activities facilitates empowerment. Additionally, parents were able to select activities most appropriate for their child's developmental level.
- Encouragement: The next principle I focussed on was providing encouragement and empowerment for the child. To do this I provided the parent with a brief statement to "practice the power of yet" in each set of instructions. The statement recommends if the child is having trouble with the activity the parent can change negative or doubt thoughts into encouraging and positive ideations by suggesting the child just has not mastered the task "yet.". By using productive wording it was intended to keep the positivity consistent throughout the activity.

Although ACES and trauma can have negative long term effects, efforts can be made to reduce children's exposures to ACES. Safe, stable nurturing relationships and environments can minimize the effects of trauma and build resilience (CDC, 2019a; CDC, 2019c Kemp, 2017). Providing fun, inexpensive activities offers opportunities for parents to further develop a safe, stable, nurturing relationship environment with their children. .

ACTIVITY OVERVIEW

Ultimately I developed 7 activities that were appropriate for children from infancy through 8th grade. I compiled supplies and instructions for up to 15 sets of each activity, totaling 90 Family Fun Time pre-packaged activities. Funding for the materials was provided by Longwood's

Cormier Honors College. The activities were made with the intention of providing choice for a wide scale of age groups and skill levels. The following is a list of the activities and the recommended age range for each:

- Bunny Art (Infant and Toddlers)
- Texture Walk (Infant and Toddlers)
- Gardening Activity (All ages except infants)
- Bird Feeders (Preschool and Older)
- Jelly Worms (School-Aged Children)
- String-Pull Art (School-Aged Children)
- Baking Activity (All ages except infants)

PARENT SELF-CARE

In addition to the Family Fun Time activities, a self-care letter and gift were given to the mothers in the shelter to elicit mindfulness and positive practices. It was important to include a self-care gift because studies suggest that caring for oneself is an important part of trauma recovery. I wanted to make sure to incorporate something that reminded the mothers to take care of themselves so they can provide that care to their children as well.

CONCLUSION

As a student I really enjoyed being able to participate in and transform the family fun time activities into something that could be suitable for a domestic violence shelter. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to be able to broaden this ongoing project into other settings.

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