

Parental Engagement and Trauma Informed Theory Application to Involvement Activities

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine if parent-child engagement and involvement activities increase the relationship of the mother and child. The participants in this study are the mothers and their children who come to a local domestic violence shelter. The parents and their child/children will participate in 30 minute engagement activities and be observed by the staff at the domestic violence shelter. The staff will then take notes and relay the information back to the individual conducting the experiment through a open ended survey. The data must be collected this way because the participants are a protected population. This study is a mixed method study that includes qualitative data from the staff at the domestic violence shelter, and quantitative data from a proxy study of these activities implemented in a different forum. The qualitative data will be analyzed to find patterns of reoccurring themes that determines if this program was effective at increasing parental engagement and being trauma informed. The quantitative data is gathered through a similar study of these programs being implemented with children who attend Headstart. This data is to show how this program is effective in different populations.

The themes found in this study are parental engagement and involvement and how they affect a parent and child's relationship. It was found through quantitative data, that parents who rated their current relationship with their children as high, had higher rates of enjoyment during the activities. The practical implementations of this study are that these programs are universal and can be used in different forums and among different populations of parents and children.

Introduction

In Farmville, Virginia there is a need for parental engagement and involvement with children who are living in domestic abuse shelters with their mothers. Domestic abuse shelters focus on helping the mother find resources for things like housing, jobs, healthcare, and typically anything to get the mother out of her current situation. What domestic abuse shelters do not focus on is how they can increase the bond with the mother and her children while in the shelter.

Through a needs assessment, it was found that parents in Farmville, Virginia want to spend more quality time with their children. Parents in Farmville tend to report that they have more than one job or work extended hours to prevent them from spending time with their children. Parents reported that at most they are able to eat dinner and do homework with their children before they have to go to bed. This information was taken into account when talking with the staff at a local domestic violence shelter. As a domestic violence shelter they reported that the mothers in the shelter have a harder time focussing on their relationship with their child. The mothers tend to focus on their situation and how to get out of it, which can cause some animosity. This sometimes leads to the mothers taking out their frustrations on their children and not spending quality time with them that is needed for healthy development.

The staff at the domestic violence shelter wanted something that would mend that relationship between the parent and child to form a trusting and healthy relationship. Thirty minute activities were introduced to the staff as a viable option that could be implemented to combat their problem. It was decided that these activities would be created in a trauma informed lens that adapted the activities used in the Family Fun Times Activities into something that could be used with families that have experienced trauma.

In the NCFR conference in 2018, it was discussed how classrooms should adopt a trauma informed lens to better mold their teaching models to their students. This study was used in order to have a baseline of how to adapt activities in a way that could be used in a forum such as the local domestic violence shelter. A study performed by Stacer and Perrucci in 2012 mention how parental involvement play a significant role in child development. This study was used as research of why these activities would work at improving the relationship between the parent and child, but also forming a healthy and open environment to increase child development. Many of the studies mentioned in the literature review have deficiencies in addressing how to increase parent-child relationships in a setting such as a domestic violence shelter. There is a lack of research of how domestic violence shelters should approach child development through ways of parental involvement and engagement.

The significance of this study is to develop a healthy parent-child relationship in hopes of breaking the domestic violence cycle. This study does not only address how to increase parent-child relationships, but also an effort to restructure the environment the child is in to stop the intergenerational transmission of violence through generations who were exposed. This study is to address ways to in which trauma informed parent involvement and engagement activities affect the relationship between the parent and child.

Are trauma informed parent/child engagement and involvement activities effective in a domestic violence shelter? At a conference last year at the National Council for Family Relations, Burke and Ghaour, there was information from various studies that indicated how to create trauma informed classrooms. The activities in this study are created with the information provided from the National Council for Family Relations. In a 2011 article written by Benson

and Mokhtari there was description of how parental involvement through engaging activities helped better the development of their child/children.

In the studies available on trauma informed theory and parent/child engagement and involvement, there is no information on how these two should be connected in domestic violence shelters. There is a need for research on what domestic violence shelters should do about increasing the relationship between the mother and her child/children while in the facility. Families who come into domestic violence shelters are focussed on many other things and do not prioritize their child/children's development and relationship. There is a neglect in the relationship because mothers are trying to sort out and get out of their current situation. In situations like this it is easy to understand how doing things with you child many be misplaced in a jumble of other things these mothers need to do. The purpose of this study is to see if trauma informed parent/child engagement and involvement activities are effective at increasing parent/child relationships in a domestic violence shelter.

Literature Review

Parental engagement and involvement is a necessity to a child's development because of its impact on future morals, decision making, and perceptions of the world. A child's schooling can help them progress academically and socially; however, the importance of parental involvement in the child's learning can affect the outcome of what type of person they become. Parents who are involved and take an active role in a child's life have a better relationship with their children. Parental engagement facilitates a safe space that is open for communication and a structured learning environment that teaches the importance of self actualization.

The conceptual definition of parental involvement and engagement focuses on a parents ability to take part in activities and finding ways to be apart of the child's life. A journal article written by Kotila, Shoppe-Sullivan, and Kamp Dush (as cited in Lang, et al, 2014), states that parental involvement is "the amount of "quality" time parents spend directly interacting with their young children in engagement (play) and caregiving activities" (Kotila, Shoppe-Sullivan & Kamp Dush, 2016). The time spent with the child can drastically change their actions and is "crucial for child development" (Kotila, et al, 2016). This definition targets exactly how to be involved in their child's life. It describes how the interaction can be through playing and participating in activities. In this journal Kotila describes parental engagement activities as "intellectually and emotionally stimulating and involve positive affect and responsiveness from parents" (Kotila et al, 2016). Another example of a conceptual definition of parental engagement and involvement, mentioned in Walsh, Cromer and Weigel (as cited in LaRocque, 2011), is the "parents or caregivers investment in the education of their children" (Walsh, Cromer & Weigel, 2014). The time a parents spends with their child will further mold the child's development.

The importance of parental involvement and engagement and its long term effects on a child are vital for a child to reach self actualization. Parents cannot fully rely on a school system to be the only level of support and the foundational aspects of a child's growth and development. It is a parents job to create and open line of communication and a home learning environment. The environment at home is suppose to teach skills in a creative way that helps children form a sense of individualism and self proficiency. These skills have to be established in order for further development. An educational review by Goodall and Montgomery, makes the argument that parents need to move away from just having involvement with the school and to make a

greater effort to have more involvement with their children. The review expresses that the commitment to engage with their child should be much greater than their involvement with their child's school (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). Parents should still have a good relationship and an amount of involvement with their child's school, but not solely survive on the schools engagement with the child. Also, having a good relationship with the school helps the parental involvement at home. The insight to what their child is learning at school can help the parents better coincide some of their activities at home with the activities and learning goals that they are currently being taught in the classroom.

Having parental involvement with children under five years old is vital because of its long term effects on a child's development. Stacer and Perrucci (2012) introduce (as cited in Coleman, 1988 and Lareau, 2003) that "time spent with children can have positive instrumental and emotional benefits and may provide access to social and cultural capital that provides advantages in social and intellectual development" (Stacer & Perrucci, 2012). When a child has a deep-seated relationship with their parents it leads to gaining good communication skills, academic skills, social skills and skills to better express emotions. The long term effects of parental engagement and involvement are attributed to academic success and a stronger family unit (Stacer & Perrucci, 2012). Parental involvement with children under the age of five years old can benefit them later on in life because they know they have support of their parents and a good developmental foundation to build off of. Children will acknowledge that they are important in their parents lives. Stacer And Perrucci (2012) includes this in their explanation of importance of parental engagement and involvement in the home. Stacer (2012) states (as cited in Benson and Mokhtari 2011; DiMaggio 1982), that "parent activities with children at home

reading or playing games can strengthen parent-child emotional bonds, expand parental influence, and strengthen achievement skills” (Stacer & Perrucci, 2012). Parental involvement will help a child be able to acquire effectiveness of controlling emotions, having academic successes and generating a good moral compass in the long term.

Trauma Theory

Trauma deeply impacts those who experience it. Trauma theory is an explanation of how trauma can infiltrate a person’s life on a daily basis. The researchers Rice and Grooves (2005) indicated that trauma is the response in relation to the event, not the event itself. The event ends; however, the trauma stays with that person. In trauma theory one must be able to break down why certain behaviors and symptoms arise in victims of abuse. The behaviors and symptoms are adaptive measures that the victims now use as a necessary response when encountering triggers of the abuse (Kemp, 2017). These responses are means of coping with the trauma that they have endured.

Bloom (1999) categorizes the body’s stress responses as flight, fight or freeze responses. Flight, fight, or freeze responses happen when the person feels threatened or encounters a trigger. The body’s organs facilitate these responses in order to protect the person. When a person experiences traumatic events for an extended period of time their stress response may be continuously activated. In Burke and Ghayour (2018) there is 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. The person’s body never shuts off its fear response, because they are in a constant state of fear and panic.

These trauma induced responses adapt as time goes on. Briere (1992) categorizes these adaptations in three stages. The first stage is the abuse survivors initial reactions to the traumatic event. Reactions are severe in this stage because they are in a crisis that is non normative and they usually do not have the right parental support needed in order to deal with the event. The second stage is accommodation. During this stage the survivor resorts to any behavior that helps them cope. The third stage is long term elaboration and secondary accommodation. Biere (1992) suggests that is when the survivor combines the coping strategies and behaviors with their trauma. As the survivor processes the traumatic event there is a change in how they cope as time goes on to better suit what they are experiencing. Briere (1992) describes these individualized ways of coping as the survivors “functional attempts to cope”. The strategies the survivors use are their best attempt to function as they normally would.

Trauma Informed Care

Developing programs that adequately recognize trauma is essential when working with the affected population. Children who have either witnessed or endured abuse need a trauma informed environment to help promote healthy ways of coping. One way to promote these healthy coping strategies is “positive [and] developmentally oriented programs that serve as a point of contact between” the child and their support system (Kemp, 2017). Kemp (2017) mentions that “children benefit from programs that promote positive and responsible parent-child relationships”. To develop programs and activities for children, that experience adverse childhood experiences, one must use guiding principles of trauma informed care. Cole et al 2013 developed a set of guiding principles for those working with populations who experiences trauma. The principles of trauma informed care encompass safety, trustworthiness,

encouragement/empowerment, collaboration, choice, and respect of cultural, historical, and gender issues. The facilitator must be able to “recognize the prevalence and the effects of trauma” in order to adapt their environment using the guiding principles of trauma informed care (Cole. et al, 2013). Using these principles when developing programs help promote an environment that is well versed to accommodate those with trauma.

ACE Study

Adverse childhood experiences (ACES) are non normative experiences that can happen in a child’s life. Some examples being, physical or sexual abuse, parental separation, witness to mother being treated violently, and emotional and/or physical neglect. Adverse experiences can dramatically affect a child and their future risk for health and social problems. The ACE study was performed to gather data to see if there was a graded dose-response relationship (positive correlation) between adverse childhood experiences and the risk for health and social problems. The researchers in the ACE study studied 17,000 Health Maintenance Organization members by using surveys to detect ACE’s and their current state of health. The researchers found that there was a positive correlation between between ACEs and future health and well being.

SSNREs

SSNREs stands for safe stable, and nurturing relationships and environments. SSNREs are vital to a child because they promote healthy growth and development. A parent child relationship needs to be developed in order for the child to flourish in their environment. Without SSNREs, the child could experience impacts on their health and development. SSNREs impacts are similar to how ACEs have an effect on future life problems with health pertaining to

development (social, emotional, and cognitive) that can lead to disease, disability, and/or early death.

Developing activities that are trauma informed and promote parent child involvement will form safe, stable, and nurturing relationships and environments. Providing parents with fun and engaging activities with their child will build back the relationship between the parent and child. The activities are made to encourage the parents to dedicate time with their child to participate in something fun they do together.

Emotion Regulation

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. The child could express different types of maladaptive emotions. Some examples of maladaptive emotions are “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 the child trying to cope and compartmentalize the stress caused by their trauma. Children who experience trauma live their day to day lives being hypervigilant. They constantly feel as though there is an immediate threat. Being hypervigilant and stressed for an extended amount of time increases cortisol levels, which is a factor in why it is difficult for them to regulate their emotions.

Activities that encompass parent child involvement and “foster an acceptance of emotions will likely improve psychological well-being” (Rudenstine, Espinosa, McGee, & Routhier 2018). Since the children at Madeline’s House have experienced trauma, they may have trouble regulating their emotions. Things such as screaming, tantrums, and hitting may be

common because of the situation they are in. Negative emotions and behaviors can be exacerbated because of things they see their parent(s) doing. This causes the child to model or project what they see because those behaviors and emotions are demonstrated by their parent(s). The activities provided are meant to create an environment to redirect the negative emotions the child is feeling. The activities are not designed to cause frustration that may in turn cause negative emotions. Every activity is meant to encourage the parent and child to de-stress and spend time together, where the child is the main focus.

Setting the Tone of the Activities using Guiding Principles of Trauma Informed Care

These activities are designed to encompass the guiding principles of trauma informed practice and care mentioned in Cole, Eisher, Gregory and Ristuccia (2013). Starting with safety, the activities are structured so the parent can take breaks during the activities to talk and have check-ins with the child. The parent can guide a conversation to regain insight into the child's life and try to focus on their relationship.

For a smooth transition during the activity there are clear and concise instructions and all the materials that are needed. By making sure everything is prepared prior to reduce any confusions or frustrations that could disrupt the child's emotional regulation. Making sure there is trustworthiness in the activities is the main focus to avoid any impediments that may arise.

Next, the activities will provide encouragement and empowerment for the child. To do this by providing the parent with a brief statement to "practice the power of yet" in each set of instructions (Cole, Eisher, Gregory and Ristuccia 2013). This way if the child is having trouble with the activity the parent would change negative or doubt thoughts into encouraging and

positive ideations. By using productive wording it will keep the positivity consistent throughout the activity.

To capture the aspect of the collaboration and choice guiding principle, there will be alternative activities for each age group. There is a high possibility that the activity is not something the child would enjoy. To counteract that problem, there are options for the child to choose from. This also applies to the parents because their child might be at a different skill level than the activity that they were provided with. This way the parent can participate in the activities that will produce the best outcome for them and their child.

Lastly, making sure that the activities are best suited for the people in which I am working with. The activities are developed with the understanding and respect for cultural, historical, and gender issues. The activities are meant to be fun and are not meant to disrespect or offend any of the participants.

Method

Qualitative

Setting: Madeline's House

The setting of this research was a domestic violence safe haven in central Virginia. The home admits women and their children for 30 days to provide safety and a safe plan to re-enter the community. The stay can be petitioned up to 90 days. During this time period, the women are given resources such as “counseling, crisis intervention, advocacy, referrals to legal aid, education, evidence recovery, and shelter” (SCVP). The domestic violence shelter also offers child services as long as the child is under 18. These services include counseling for children who have experienced or witnessed trauma, and educational services.

Participant Recruitment

I have been able to recruit the participants by staying in contact with the staff at the domestic violence shelter throughout the duration of the planning, creation and delivery of the activities. During the initial interviews with the staff, they concluded that the presented activities would produce family engagement between the mothers and their child/children. The staff agreed to stay in contact with the researcher throughout the distribution and partaking in the activities.

Participants

Participants are the staff at the domestic violence shelter. The staff include, but are not limited to, the education coordinators, volunteers, and anyone that has witnessed families participating in the activities.

Data Collection

Surveys were delivered to the staff at the domestic violence shelter by way of email. The survey consisted of 18 open ended questions. The survey questions were created to acquire information that answers my hypothesis (refer to Appendix A). The surveys were then emailed back to the researcher and then discarded after they were analyzed for patterns and themes.

Analysis

The surveys were planned to be transcribed into a word document without any identifying personal attributes of the participants. The survey answers were going to be analyzed to find patterns to determine if the trauma informed activities facilitated family engagement and involvement.

Quantitative

I will be analyzing proxy data for a research study conducted at eight local Head Start's, a local government run program that starts early education for low income families who have anywhere from infants to four year olds. I will be using this data to measure how parental-child involvement activities are effective when applied to a different forum. In this study children were given family engagement activities for a week. At the end of the week a survey was sent home with the child for the parent to complete. The parents were given an incentive of a \$5 dollar gift card that was attached to the survey to thank them for participating. This survey measures how effective the activities were, how enjoyable they were, and if they increased family engagement and involvement. I will be using question 37 as my independent variable and questions regarding enjoyment of the activities, for my dependent variable. In bivariate test in Table 3, variable 37 was recoded into categorical data so that 7-9 were recoded to 1 and 10 was recoded to 2. With the data I will perform two univariate and a bivariate tests to measure the effect of parental involvement on enjoyment of the stress ball balloon activity.

Results

A univariate test was performed to measure how parents rate their current relationship with their child. 77.14% of the respondents stated that they have a mostly positive relationship with their child, 2.86% of the respondents stated that they have somewhat positive relationship with their child, 8.57% of the respondents stated that they have positive relationship with their child, and 11.43% of respondents stated that they have a very positive relationship with their child. The univariate test in Table 1 indicated that parents had a mean rating of 9.63 when asked to rate their current relationship with their child.

Table 1

Univariate of Current Relationship

Current Relationship Rate	Frequency	Valid %
7	1	2.9%
8	3	8.6%
9	4	11.4%
10	27	77.1%

Note. Parents were given a 10 point Likhert scale question to rate their current relationship with their child. Scale data 0 through 6 were removed from the analysis because none of participants responded to them.

A univariate test was performed to measure how much the family enjoyed the stress ball balloon activity. .1% of respondents stated that they had no enjoyment at all, .1% of respondents stated that they had little enjoyment, .1% of respondents stated that they had neutral feelings, .1% of respondents stated that they had some enjoyment, .3% of respondents stated that they had enjoyment, .3% of respondents stated that they had a lot of enjoyment, and 2.1% of respondents stated that they had very much enjoyment. The univariate test performed indicated in, Table 2, that parents have an mean rating of 8.71 and a median of 10.0 when asked how much their family enjoyed the stress ball balloon activity.

Table 2

Univariate of Enjoyment

Enjoyment Rate Mean	Enjoyment Rate Median
8.71	10.0

Note. Parents were given a 10 point Likhert scale question to rate their families enjoyment of stress ball ballon activity. Scale data 1, 2, 4 were removed from the analysis because none of participants responded to them.

A bivariate test performed in Table 3 indicated that parents who rated their relationship with their children lower (1), had lower scores of enjoyment (average 7.38) when participating in the stress ball balloon activity. The parents who rated their current relationship with their child higher (2), had higher ratings of enjoyment (average 9.12) when participating in the stress ball balloon activity.

Table 3

Bivariate of Current Relationship and Enjoyment

Current Relationship	Enjoyment Mean	N
1 (Rate of 7-9)	7.38	8
2 (Rate of 10)	9.12	26

Note. ** The data for current relationship ratings was recoded. Parents who ranked their current relationship between 7 and 9 were recoded to 1. Parents who ranked their current relationship as 10 were recoded to 2.

Findings

No significant findings came from the qualitative data. Only one of the participants returned the survey. The one participant stated that 3 families participated in the activities and the children ranged from ages four to six. The participant stated that “I think because of the age of the children and the disobedience of the children the activities did not go as planned.” (respondent 1). The staff at the domestic violence shelter told us that the disobedience of children is one of the problems they encounter when children come into the shelter. This is caused by being uprooted from all that they know. On average the activities witnessed by the participant took an average of 3 minutes. Respondent one stated that “ The kids did not want to sit down and participate in the activities. It was a little messy when it came to doing the projects” and that “one of the kids got very violent”. These statements gave insight to how the activities could be potentially changed in the future to better suit the families in a domestic violence shelter. One change in the future could be finding less messy activities that include calming and mindfulness techniques.

The groups of participants that the survey was given to was small. Smaller sample sizes require a significant percentage of responses to allude to any findings. Without any responses back, there was no data to analyze. Another limitation may have occurred because of the time frame in which the participants were given to fill out the survey. Participants were given about a month to complete and send back the surveys. This is a short period of time for participants to

take time to write detailed answers to seventeen open ended questions. Also, some of the participants may not have witnessed this program put into action at the shelter, thus not being able to fill out the survey.

In the future, a few methods need to change when gathering qualitative data like this. One change being to get an adequate number of participants that observed this program in action. Also, giving the staff the survey when the activities were delivered. This way the staff would be able to read through the questions and think about them when families are participating in the activities. Using these methods would potentially generate a larger and adequate response rate.

Conclusion

Trauma informed parental involvement activities were given to the residents at the domestic violence shelter. Parental involvement activities were found to be helpful in child development as mentioned in a study conducted by Benson and Mokhtari (2011). One limitation in this study was subject participation. Only one of the participants filled out the survey, making it impossible to determine if the program was effective or not. Instead, quantitative data from a proxy study was used to determine if programs like these are effective in different forums. In this case the activities were delivered to Head Start. This program is for early education from infant to age 5. The activities were only given to pre-kindergarten aged children. The quantitative data gathered from parent surveys to run analyses to see if there was a significant finding between parents current relationship with their child and the rates of enjoyment during the activities. In particular, the stress ball balloon activity was analyzed on effectiveness of the activity on enjoyment scores. The stress ball balloon activity had higher enjoyment scores from parents who rated their current relationship with their child as high, than parents who rated their relationship

with their child lower. In conclusion, it was determined that activities like these are effective at increasing involvement and enjoyment between parents and children. These types of activities can be used in many forums to increase parental involvement because they target what is needed for healthy child development.

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Appendix A

Family Fun Times Activities

This survey will be used to analyze if the Family Fun Times Activities promoted family engagement and involvement. Your feedback is very important in evaluating and improving this program.

How many families participated in the activities? _____

1. What is the general age ranges of the children who participated? _____
2. Were the activities inclusive in terms of gender and age? If any were not please explain.

3. Do you feel as though the activities were age appropriate? If not explain which activity and why.

4. What was the average time taken on the activities? _____

5. Did any problems arise when completing the activities? If yes, what types of problems?

6. Did the participation in these activities cause any type of distress/agitation? If so why?

7. Were the parents engaging with the children? (helping them or letting the child/children to do it by themselves) If yes how so?

8. Do you think that the activities helped the parent/child relationship? In what ways do you think that the activities helped?

9. What activities did you observe?

10. What activities were the most popular?

11. What did you like about the activities?

12. What did you dislike about the activities?

13. What specifically would you change about the activities?

14. Do you feel that the activities promoted parental engagement? If yes, how? If not what would you recommend doing that would promote parental engagement?

15. Do you feel as though the activities were trauma informed? Please explain why or why not.

16. Were these activities helpful for your organization? If yes, in what ways? If no why not?

17. Would you want to keep activities like these at Madeline's House? Are there any activities you would want to have if we proceeded to supply Madeline's House with activities?
