

Overview of purposes of Academic Mentor Training Program and other Training programs re: Mental Health that are part of the CUN programs for foster children in LAUSD.

Victoria Stevens, Ph.D.

Given advances in understanding developmental neurobiology, we now know that the “nature v. nurture” dichotomy is no longer clear. We know that genetics predispose us to develop in certain ways, but we also now know that our interactions with our environment have a significant effect upon how those predispositions will be expressed – even with regard to gene expression itself. These interactions with our environment organize our brain’s development and therefore, shape our future behavior.

The growth of each region of the brain largely depends on receiving stimulation which then promotes growth in the region. Stimulation or the lack of it creates and strengthens or causes the lack of creation or discarding of connections among neuron – the nerve cells in the brain. We have more than 100 billion neurons at birth, which is almost all we will ever have. While the basic structure of the brain is intact at birth, much of the growth of the brain occurs in the first few years after birth. By age 3, a baby’s brain has reached almost its adult size.

Synapses are the connections between neurons and they organize the brain by forming pathways that connect all parts of the brain. The synapses that govern basic body functions are present at birth, but almost all other functions are developed post-natally. The growth rate of synapses occurs at an astonishing rate and by the age of 3 children have about 1,000 trillion synapses. Those that are strengthened remain intact, but many are discarded and by the time a child has become an adolescent, about half of their synapses have been discarded.

“Plasticity” is the term that describes the way the brain creates, strengthens or discards synapses and neuronal connections in response to the unique environment of each child. “Environment” refers to both the chemical, biological and sensory experience of the mother’s womb and the interactions with caregivers after birth. All children need stimulation and nurturance for healthy brain development, but if the child’s caregivers are indifferent or hostile, the child’s brain development will be impaired. But, because the brain adapts to its environment – it will adapt to a negative environment just as easily as to a positive environment.

We know that all human infants are genetically predisposed to form attachments to their primary caregivers, but if those caregivers are absent, unresponsive or threatening – that attachment process can be disrupted. The essential task of the first years of human life is the development of a secure bond of attachment between infant and caregiver through attuned emotional communication which leads to the capacity for emotional regulation in the developing child. In situations of neglect or abuse, the infant will react with either hyperarousal or dissociation, which is a disengagement from the world or a kind of “spacing-out” in their attempt to somehow regulate, organize and protect themselves from both external and internal emotional stimuli.

Research shows that the first few years form the foundation for a child’s future functioning at all levels. Secure attachment leads to increased resilience over the

lifespans and insecure attachment leads to increased risk for psychological disorders, substance abuse or problems resulting from aggression. Maltreatment and disrupted attachment can lead to emotional, behavioral and learning problems that can persist throughout their lifetime – especially in the absence of thoughtful, informed and early interventions.

Children who have experienced parental neglect and/or abuse develop ways of adapting to the chaos or threat in the environment that are maladaptive in other environments, such as a new foster home or school. This means that even if the new environment is full of kindness, warmth and nurturing – a maltreated child may have great difficulty functioning in it as their brain has become hyper-alert to perceived danger and has not developed the pathways and memories that enable them to adapt to a new and different environment – even if it is positive. This presents understandable problems to foster parents, counselors, mentors and teachers – especially if they do not understand what leads to these kinds of defensive strategies.

A child exposed to chronic, traumatic stress develops an automatic fear response as her brain has adapted to an insecure, unpredictable and dangerous world. This state is called “hyper-arousal” and can result in behaviors such as hyperactivity, anxiety, sleep disorders, incontinence, lack of impulse control, aggressivity and problems forming attachment to others. Not only may they react anxiously or aggressively to perceived threats as an attempt to protect themselves, they may also provoke aggression in an attempt to control it. If the more aggressive attempts to create a connection with caregivers fail, the child may resort to dissociation or “freezing” as a final resort: they cannot do anything about the situation and they cannot leave.

In cases of disrupted and insecure attachment, the lower brain-processes become dominant and higher-order cognitive skills and social skills can become impaired. These cognitive or higher-order skills include the ability to control their own impulses and emotions as well as the ability to read or understand the emotions of others – often leading to a lack of empathy and other social skills. Other effects can be a susceptibility to depression, anxiety disorders – including post-traumatic stress disorder, impairments of both attention and memory – including attention-deficit and attention-deficit-hyperactivity disorders.

This information is becoming widely known in the psychological community, but is not often part of the training or guidance that is necessary for foster parents or teachers to understand the kinds of behavior that may be exhibited by children who have been neglected or abused and removed from their homes by the child welfare system.

Understanding the neurobiological consequences of neglect, abuse and separation is crucial for caregivers at all levels. While primary prevention is ideal, the training of those who take on the care of these children at any age is equally crucial. Even though early experiences create a foundation based upon adaptation to the caregivers and the early environment – we know now that the brain has more plasticity over the lifetime than had been understood even in the recent past. That means that creating experiences of secure attachment and providing the tools for the development of emotional regulation can facilitate self-regulation, impulse control, resilience, higher-order cognitive and social skills can help to alter the course of a child’s life at any age.

One such effort is being undertaken by Children Uniting Nations which facilitates new attachment bonds between mentors and foster children. Daphna Ziman and her organization is dedicated to providing current information about neurobiology and mental health to the mentors that she provides to foster children.

A training for “Academic Mentors” for Children Uniting Nations has been created by Victoria Stevens, Ph.D. informed by this information. These mentors work within the school system and help foster children to develop the emotional regulatory skills that will facilitate their ability to sustain attention, develop memory skills, succeed in their schoolwork and graduate from high-school. This program is currently being piloted in several schools in Los Angeles.

In the coming year, Victoria Stevens will create trainings for teachers, school counselors and foster parents so that every member of the support system for these children understands this information.

Victoria Stevens, in addition to the training of parents, teachers, etc. will make sure that the school curricula and assessment procedures be reformed in the light of CUN developing understanding of brain development. Some specific reforms would be that all of the arts: visual art, dance, music, theatre and poetry need to be considered core subjects for all children; physical education that includes training in bodily regulation such as yoga and meditation need to be taught to all students; assessment needs to include other forms of intelligence aside from test-taking skills and knowledge in language arts and math (directly related to reforming NCLB – which in its current form is punishing kids who have been maltreated for not performing on cognitive tasks that they may not have the skills to master).

With regard to foster children who have “aged-out” of the foster care system – we are dealing with a much more difficult situation. As caring members of society, careful thought needs to be given to how to create ways to reach and care for those who are out of the school system – especially those that did not graduate. In order to do this, experts from all areas will need to work together and create policy recommendations that will result in thoughtful, informed programs for children who have been victims of abuse and neglect of all ages.