

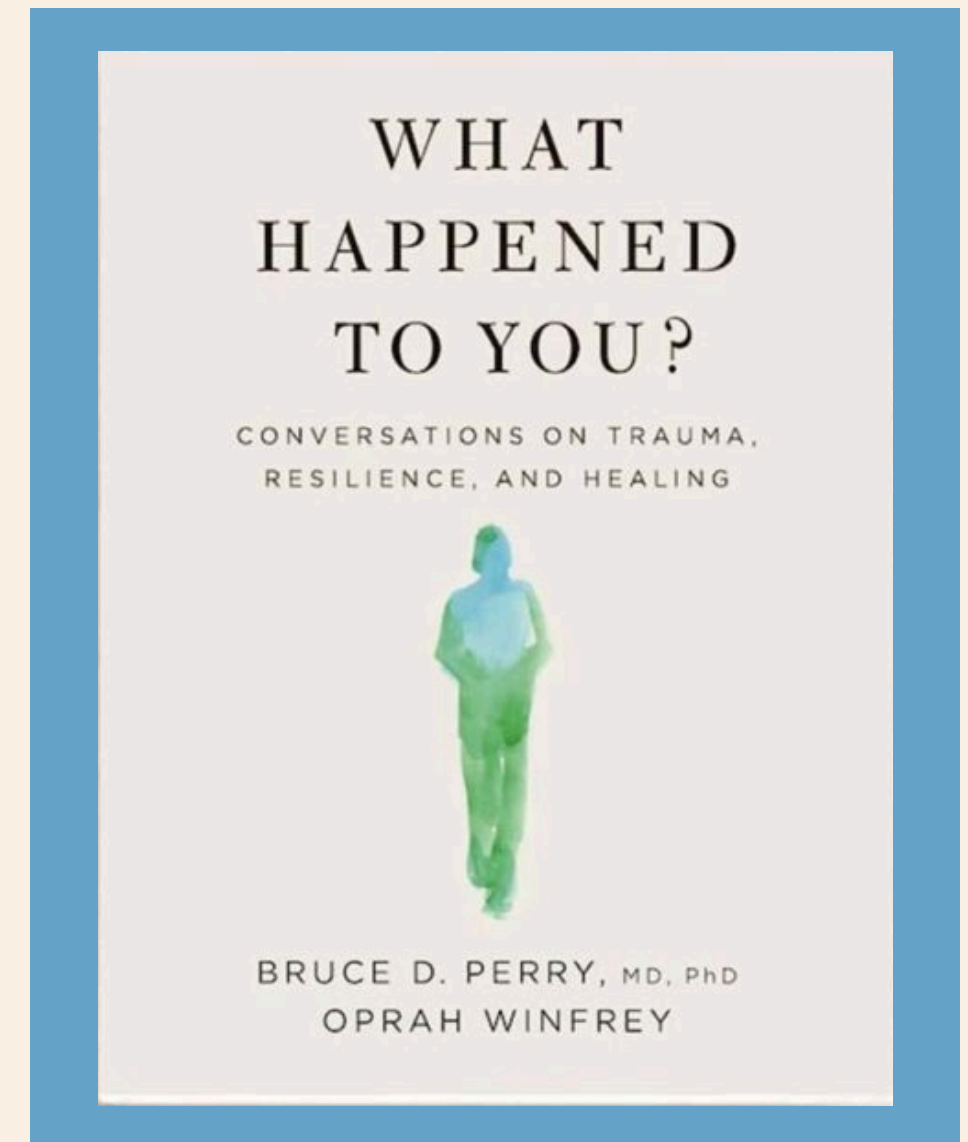
# What Happened to You?

A Guide for Educators Working With Young  
Children Who Have Experienced Trauma

**Presented by:**

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The information in this presentation is based on the book *What Happened To You?* by Dr. Bruce D. Perry and Oprah Winfrey. This book examines trauma from a different lense than usual by focusing on what happened to a person instead of what is “wrong” with them. It contains conversations about trauma, resilience, and healing.



# We Will Explore:

1. Trauma, PTSD, and Childhood Adversities
2. The Impact Trauma has on the Brain
3. Experiences for Infants & Children
4. The Traditional Pillars of Healing
5. School Implications & Action Steps




# Trauma



There is not a clear definition of trauma because people each have their own experience from the same event. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services (SAMHSA) has given trauma a three E's definition:

1. The event
2. The experience
3. The effects

## **Things that can impact how trauma affects a person:**

- The age of the child
  - If the child had/has a consistent, nurturing caregiver
  - The child's stress response capability- is it strong? is it flexible?
  - The child's level of tolerance to sensory complexities & stressors- some have "hardiness" and others are more "sensitive"
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# Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

The 4 main symptom clusters following a traumatic event:

1. "intrusive" symptoms - recurring, unwanted images and thoughts of the traumatic event, and dreams or nightmares about it.

2. "avoidant" symptoms- avoiding things because someone feels distressed after being reexposed to people, places, or other reminders of the original traumatic event.

3. changes in moods and thinking- depressive symptoms such as sadness, lost of pleasure from anything, guilt, exhaustion, etc.

4. alteration in arousal and reactivity- anxiety, hypervigilance, increased startle response, high and variable heart rate, and sleep problems.

# Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE)

The Adverse Childhood Experience Survey was created in 1998. It was a simple ten-item questionnaire of “adversities” that may have taken place during the first eighteen years of life.

Correlations have been found between an ACE score and a greater risk for health problems, suicide, mental health problems, substance abuse and dependence, and more, but an ACE score doesn't tell everything....

ACE is a superficial glance at what happened to you, not the deep exploration needed to really understand someone. It doesn't tell the timing, pattern, intensity, or the presence of buffering or healing factors.

# The Impact on the Brain

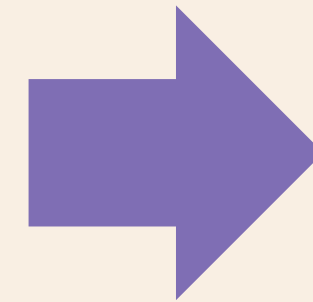
- The brain starts developing in the womb
- If a mother experiences stress, it can impact the child's developing brain
- The brain is developing the most during the child's first five years of life, which is why a child's experiences during this time is so important
- The functioning of the brain depends on the "state" that we are in- calm, alert, alarm, fear, or terror. When you are in a calm state you can use the "smartest" parts of your brain, but when you feel threatened you are not able to think as clearly and you become more reactive or reflexive.



# Experiences as an Infant

## What does an infant need?

- Bonding experiences with consistent, nurturing caregivers that are responsive to the child's needs
- The feeling that they are important and cared for
- Rhythmic activities to help regulate- rocking, walking, swinging, being sung to, etc.



**Helps them build an internal worldview that people are safe, predictable, and caring. This leads to being able to build connections with others as we grow.**

# Experiences as a Child

**“Children are not born resilient, they are born malleable”**

**-Dr. Bruce Perry**

People’s brains are always changing from their experiences. We can “demonstrate resilience” but our brain will never go back to exactly the way it was before an experience.



# Traditional Healing

Our ancestors were able to heal from their trauma by using

**The Pillars of Traditional Healing**, which were:

1. Connection to the clan and the natural world
2. Regulating rhythm through dance, drumming, and song
3. A set of beliefs, values, and stories that brought meaning to random trauma
4. Natural hallucinogens or other plant-derived substances

Can you think of one or more of these pillars that helps you feel regulated in your own life?



# Implications at School

When a child has experienced trauma, it might look like something different at school  
Such as...

A child's hypervigilance of the Alert state → mistaken for ADHD

A child's resistance and defiance of Alarm and Fear → mistaken as Oppositional Defiance Disorder

We often think that a calm environment should result in calm children.  
While this is a good learning environment, we may see that children who come from trauma or chaotic home lives, panic in a calm environment since it is not what they are used to.



# Problems with Current Early Childhood Practices

**Trauma-Informed Care:** A broad term used that doesn't have a real definition. Dr. Bruce Perry explains that it was a good effort but not all places that use it are on the same page about what it means and how to actually use it in practice. It's great to be aware that trauma can result in certain behaviors and issues, but how do we actually create opportunities for healing?

**Biases:** Many people have biases that they may not be aware of, but educators especially need to spend time understanding their own biases regarding race, gender, and sexual orientation. Do you know what yours are?

**Behaviors:** Students exhibit behaviors that educators find challenging. We often focus on stopping the behavior instead of getting to the root of the problem. Why is the child doing this? What are they trying to obtain or avoid? Removing a child from their classmates can have a very negative impact on them.



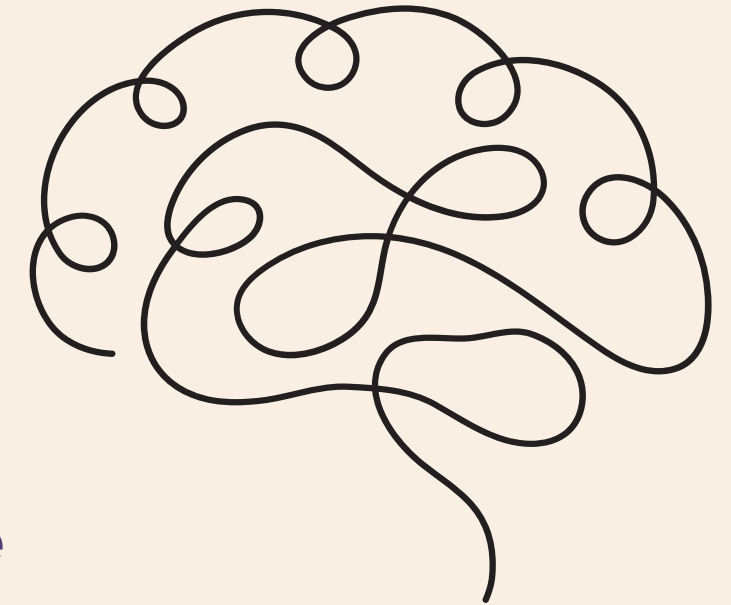
# What CAN We Do?

- Be **trauma-aware**: We need to be aware that children have experienced trauma and that we need to find ways to help and support them
- Understand child development & know that trauma can impact a child's development
  - Even if a child is 7 years old, it doesn't mean their social emotional development is the same as a typical 7-year-old, especially if they have experienced trauma
- Do not assume the worst of children. If they are exhibiting behaviors that are challenging, try to figure out what they are trying to obtain or avoid
- Provide regulating, rhythmic, and healing activities for children such as:
  - dance, music (listening & playing), exercise (running, walking, etc), sports



# What CAN We Do? Cont.

- The **Neurosequential Model** creates a version of how an individual's brain appears to be organized. It helps understand the source of the problem so that we can understand what happened to the person and how to help fix it. Many school therapists and some special educators are trained and can do this on a student by request.
- Provide opportunities for children to build relationships & community within the school
  - think of your classroom as a school family, care for each other that way
  - provide activities, games, and songs where children work in partners
  - teach relationship-building skills explicitly & through natural play



# What CAN We Do? Cont.

The most important thing that children and adults need to heal from trauma is to



**FEEL CONNECTED**



Take time to get to know each student

Find opportunities to connect with them on a daily basis

Help students build relationships with peers

Create family events at school to build the home-school relationship

Offer community resources & events to families to get them involved

# Additional Resources

- To learn more about the Neurosequential Model in Education visit: <https://www.neurosequential.com/nme>
- The book *The Boy Who Was Raised by Dogs*, by Dr. Bruce D. Perry, is another book to learn more about childhood trauma.
- To learn more ways that you can help children in your classroom with the trauma that they have experienced you can visit: <https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/MSEA-Trauma-Toolkit-for-Educators.pdf>

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