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Beginnings Workshop

creating relational sanctuaries for children who suffer from abuse

by Holly Elissa Bruno

Lissa's story: Chapter 1

Lissa was an unusually mature child. Like a fledgling fidgeting woodpecker, she pecked away at every task until the result could not be criticized. If her drawing smudged, Lissa crumpled it and started again. Lissa clowned around to distract her classmates when new situations spiked their anxiety. She knew how to cheer people up.

When unfamiliar adults entered the room, Lissa shrank in her chair. Clanging fire alarm bells catapulted Lissa out of her seat. Parent-teacher conferences, when announced, caused Lissa to wince. She quickly cloaked her vulnerability in an image of confidence.

Michael Gonta, Lissa's teacher, spotted a flicker of loneliness in Lissa's eyes. He began to find special tasks for her, asking her to help him with classroom activities. Mr. Gonta delighted in Lissa's sense of humor. He encouraged her to create cartoons and drawings which he proudly posted. When Lissa's writing project was selected as her age level's best, Lissa was stunned. Mr. Gonta was not. In the sanctuary of Mr. Gonta's classroom, Lissa bloomed like an amaryllis bulb that had been held dormant in a dark cellar.

One October morning, Mr. Gonta announced he'd be leaving soon to become principal at another school. Lissa, schooled in the lesson: "If you want something to cry about, I'll give you something to cry about," pinched herself to hold back tears.

Mr. Gonta said goodbye to Lissa on a November afternoon, unaware he was the first to soothe Lissa's terror of going home to face an explosive father and to care for an unstable mother, afflicted with mental illness. Although Lissa would continue to guard her family's secrets, she no longer felt alone. She held the torch of her teacher's loving encouragement deep inside.

This is the story of Lissa, the brown-eyed, tightly wound, and at times trouble-making little girl in Michael Gonta's classroom. This story has a happy ending. Many do not. Your kindness and caring can make all the difference in the world to a child like Lissa.

The good news is that 70% of adults who were abused as children break the cycle, and do not harm their own children. The bad news is that "Young children are the most vulnerable to being abused or neglected. Statistically, the younger a child is, the more likely he or she is to be maltreated. The leading cause of death in the first year of life is homicide" (Center for the Study of Social Policy, CSSP, 2004).

> *For children who are not receiving adequate nurturing care at home, the work that early care and education programs do can be extremely important. The very existence of other caregivers in their lives and of opportunities for creative expression, growth of self-esteem, and exploration contribute to children's resiliency. This can be critical in cases where the level of abuse and neglect is sufficiently severe to warrant state intervention and in cases where it is not.*
> — Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP), 20004

As you read about Lissa and her teacher, Michael Gonta, consider whether you know a child or a teacher like them.

Perhaps you have seen Lissa in your classroom or through the window of a parked car? Lissa's eyes beseech: "Can you see me? Can you help me?" The child who knows abuse aches to be loved.

Holly Elissa Bruno's (MA, JD) textbook, *Leading on purpose: Emotionally intelligent early childhood administration* (McGraw-Hill, 2008) explores the art and science of building authentic and respectful relationships. Former Maine Assistant Attorney General and Associate Professor and Dean of Faculty at University of Maine-Augusta, Holly Elissa describes herself as a 'recovering' attorney. Her keynote addresses have engaged audiences from Reykjavik to Phoenix and Tampa to Budapest. As Adjunct Faculty at Wheelock College, she teaches early childhood leadership courses.

Most likely, her abusers ache in the same way. As Michael Gonta soothed Lissa's soul, so too can each of us.

Invisible wounds

PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) is a direct consequence of abuse and abandonment. PTSD can afflict a child at any age, riding the child's spirit into adulthood as ferociously as an attacking wildcat. Flashbacks (unbidden memories of the abuse), panic attacks (racing heart, gasping for life-sustaining breath), self-hatred (feelings of unworthiness), and addictions (both chemical and 'process' addictions like work addiction and codependency) are running buddies with PTSD.

Early memories, lost to our consciousness, nevertheless continue to shape our experience. The persistence of past learning into a present where it is irrelevant or even destructive is extremely problematic
— Cozolino, 2006

Who harms our most vulnerable and trusting little ones? Family members, moms, dads, and relatives in positions of trust, are most likely to inflict these wounds. What a sad twist of fate it is that those vested with bestowing unconditional love inflict pain instead.

PTSD is an invisible wound. Symptoms may be difficult to spot especially in pre-verbal children. Abused children become professors of 'image management,' appearing "fine, thank you" on the outside, while suffering on the inside. Abused children charged with keeping shadowy family secrets, do so even as their hearts yearn to tell the truth.

Breaking the cycle: Soothing balm for wounds

No child need carry the PTSD wildcat on her back as a life sentence. Early childhood professionals can prevent and soothe the terrors of PTSD by exercising emotional intelligence (EQ). EQ, reading people as well as we read books, is the awareness and practice of healthy, loving relationships. Thanks to the new field of neuroscience, the study of how our relationships change us on a cellular level, we know for sure that healthy relationships help heal broken hearts.

I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you've done, but people will never forget how you made them feel.
— Maya Angelou

Using EQ, we can take these steps toward healing:

- Provide a relational sanctuary of unconditional love and acceptance for the child;
- Seek family members' strengths while welcoming them into supportive networks of caring adults.

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Every family, including those trapped in abuse and neglect, has within it the desire to be liberated from the wildcat's claws.

Every child deserves at least one adult who is crazy in love with that child.
— Rose, Child Care Director, West Virginia

Relational sanctuaries

We remember the people who touch our hearts. Titles after our names or dollar amounts in our bank account matter little compared to the legacy of touching the life of a child. Each classroom can be a relational sanctuary, safe from violence, and full of inspiration. How do we create a relational sanctuary for each child?

- Pay attention to all the ways we communicate loving acceptance.
- Be aware of possible signs of PTSD in children.
- In understanding how children remember their life experiences, offer opportunities for happy memories.

First, pay attention to all the ways we communicate loving acceptance. Abused children with PTSD are acutely attuned to unspoken messages. Emotion is communicated heart to heart. According to the Institute for Heart Math, our heartbeat can be felt by another person up to five feet away. Each beat of our heart communicates welcome or lasers a foreboding chill.

Intentions can be felt. As you greet each child, your smile, gentle touch, upbeat voice, or passing glance of kindness becomes in itself a safe place. In that warmth, each child can begin to unfold into the person she is meant to become. Sixty-five to 90 percent of human emotion is communicated without words.

Dr. Peter Salovey, who coined the term, 'emotional intelligence,' assures us, "The emotionally intelligent person is often a pleasure

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to be around and leaves others feeling better." Consider the difference Mr. Gonta made by building a relational sanctuary for each child in his classroom.

Identifying PTSD

Second, be aware of possible signs of PTSD in children. PTSD symptoms in children include:

- Abnormal startle response (Lissa jumps as a fire alarm clangs)
- Hyper-vigilance and hyper-arousal (Child fears closing her eyes at nap time)
- Memory and concentration problems (Difficulty trusting enough to learn)
- Feeling worse when reminded of the trauma (Lissa winces when adults approach her)
- Avoidance ("Unloving behavior signals to the child that the world is a dangerous place and tells him: Do not explore, do not discover, and do not take chances." (Cozolino, 2006)

Other factors also may lead to these or similar behaviors. Nonetheless, an intensely fearful child who craves safety deserves gentle attention. Her family may need the same. Balancing our 'mandatory reporting' obligation with reaching out to families is a challenge we address later in this article.

When children are abused or neglected, they are being given the message that they are not among the chosen.
— Cozolino, 2006

With PTSD, memories of trauma are locked away inside a child. Sometimes, the child does not have conscious access to those memories. Understanding how our memory works demonstrates the importance of safe, supportive classroom experiences like Mr. Gonta provided to Lissa.

Memories are made of this

Third, by understanding how children remember their life experiences, adults can offer happier memories. Did you know we have two types of memory: 'implicit' and 'explicit'?

We use explicit memory ('ex' indicates from the outside) when we concentrate on studying facts and figures and other 'book learning.' If you memorized Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address," you used your explicit memory. "What explicit memory serves up for conscious reflection, implicit memory does not" (Lewis et al., 2000).

Implicit ('im' indicates from within) memory kicks in without our thinking. When we are uplifted or threatened, we memorize those moments. Our hearts embrace happy moments like a hug and encase painful moments like a thorn. We "get a gut feeling" or an intuition about what is happening to and around us. Lissa "took to heart" memories of her teacher's kind smile.

A child's dual memory banks mature at different rates. The structures generating specific memories are immature at birth, and they require years of neurodevelopment to become fully functional. Implicit memory requires no warm up; it is operational before a baby is born. In later life the explicit memory system slowly degenerates as the decades advance, while the implicit memory maintains its youthful robustness.
— Lewis, Amini, & Lannon, 2000

To experience your own implicit memory, recall the teacher or other adult who was your Michael Gonta: Who encouraged you and believed in your promise? As you recall that person's kindness, you are likely to feel your implicit memory system at work. When someone makes a difference in our lives, that person is held sacred in our memory.

Children you teach not only learn shapes and colors, but on a deeper level, remember that you touched their lives with love. Think of a child's laughter, wonder or delight in your presence; the child will hold those feelings for a lifetime. This understanding invites us all to be present to children and to let go of distractions in order to create and savor these moments that lead to healing memories.

Parents, like their children, can be touched by loving acceptance and encouragement. Brick walls of defensiveness can crumble, revealing the promise locked away behind the wall.

Early childhood programs are grounded in the principles of identifying children's strengths and providing the encouragement that creates an open space for learning. That same philosophy, when applied to parents, creates an opportunity to reach out to families in a non-threatening, non-judgmental way.
— CSSP, 2004

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Seeing through to family strengths: Connections to replace isolation

Stunningly, one factor defines most traumatizing homes: isolation. In isolation, abuse and neglect can take place behind closed doors. Parents who are isolated from other adults have no one to stop them from revisiting terrors of their own childhoods on their children.

Once connected with others, these same parents have release valves, sounding boards and peers who are facing similar stresses with non-violent approaches. When isolation ends, abuse diminishes. The small child within the abuser begins her recovery once isolation becomes meaningful connection.

Empathy rather than sympathy opens closed doors. Families labeled 'at risk' are more likely to turn away than families whose strengths are acknowledged and respected. The CSSP Guidebook (2004) encourages us to partner with families to increase protective factors like:

- Parental resilience
- An array of social connections
- Adequate knowledge of parenting and child development
- Concrete support in times of need, including access to necessary services, such as mental health (CSSP, p. 13)

The protective factor CSSP encourages for children is "healthy social and emotional development." By using EQ to provide relational sanctuaries, we buoy a child's social and emotional development.

Rather than turn a family away by judging them, we can seek strengths to build upon by asking questions like:

- What is hard about being a parent?
- Are there ways our staff could help you deal with these challenges?
- We want to be a welcoming place for parents, where families feel comfortable asking for help. What are some of your ideas on how we can do that?
- We are particularly concerned when parents seem stressed, isolated, or overwhelmed. Do you have ideas about how we can reach out to parents at these times?
- We want to make it easy for parents to make connections with each other. How can we do that? (CSSP, 2004, p. 25)

Parents who feel cared for and respected are more open to connecting with others, ending isolation. As families begin to find support through connection, the pressure cooker at home releases in a grateful 'whoosh.' Children are the first to feel the relief.

Mandated reporters and co-reporting

We are required by law to serve as mandated reporters, informing authorities of abuse and neglect. One option is 'co-reporting.' Ask the family if they are willing to report the incident with you. By co-reporting, the family indicates awareness of the problem and willingness to ask for help. Professionals who have partnered with families in co-reporting indicate that this process inspires hope.

This story has a happy ending

Hope heals, or at least opens the door for healing. Lissa carried into adulthood, warm memories of hope and promise from being in Mr. Gonta's classroom.

Lissa's story: Chapter 2

Fifty-three years have passed since Lissa waved goodbye to Mr. Gonta. Now a mother herself who adores her children, Lissa recalls with gratitude the people who helped her break the cycle of abuse. Michael Gonta is at the top of her gratitude list.

Lissa pens a thank-you letter to Mr. Gonta to let him know the difference he made in her life. She has tracked down his address after making many phone inquiries and other searches. Mr. Gonta, now almost 80, writes back that of course he has not forgotten Lissa and her big brown eyes.

Lissa boards a plane and crosses over three states to rejoin her favorite teacher. As she spies her smiling teacher, Lissa's heart leaps into her eyes. The two adults, forever connected through hope, hug as if the world were just born. Later, Michael offers Lissa another gift, his poem:

Little Lissa,
You glow with achievement, a teacher's dream.
If immortality is what one leaves behind
Now, feeble me, I glow through you.
My treasured instrument,
Thank you forever.

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By loving a child into a place of hope, trust, and promise, early childhood professionals (teachers, bus drivers, cooks, and directors) can break the cycles of abuse and neglect. Even on a cellular level, our unconditional kindness and acceptance can carry over into healing changes for the child and her family.

Nelson Mandela reminds us: "As we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, we liberate others." The relational sanctuaries we create with our hearts are healing spaces.

We all have the potential to love a child into a future of promise and hope. I know. Michael Gonta was my teacher.

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Web sites

Facts about traumatic stress:
www.apa.org/practice/traumaticstress.html

Booklet for caregivers of children with PTSD:
www.childtrauma.org/ctamaterials/ptsd_interdisc.asp

Children's PTSD behaviors:
www.nimh.nih.gov/...ptsd/do-children-react-differently-than-adults.shtm

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