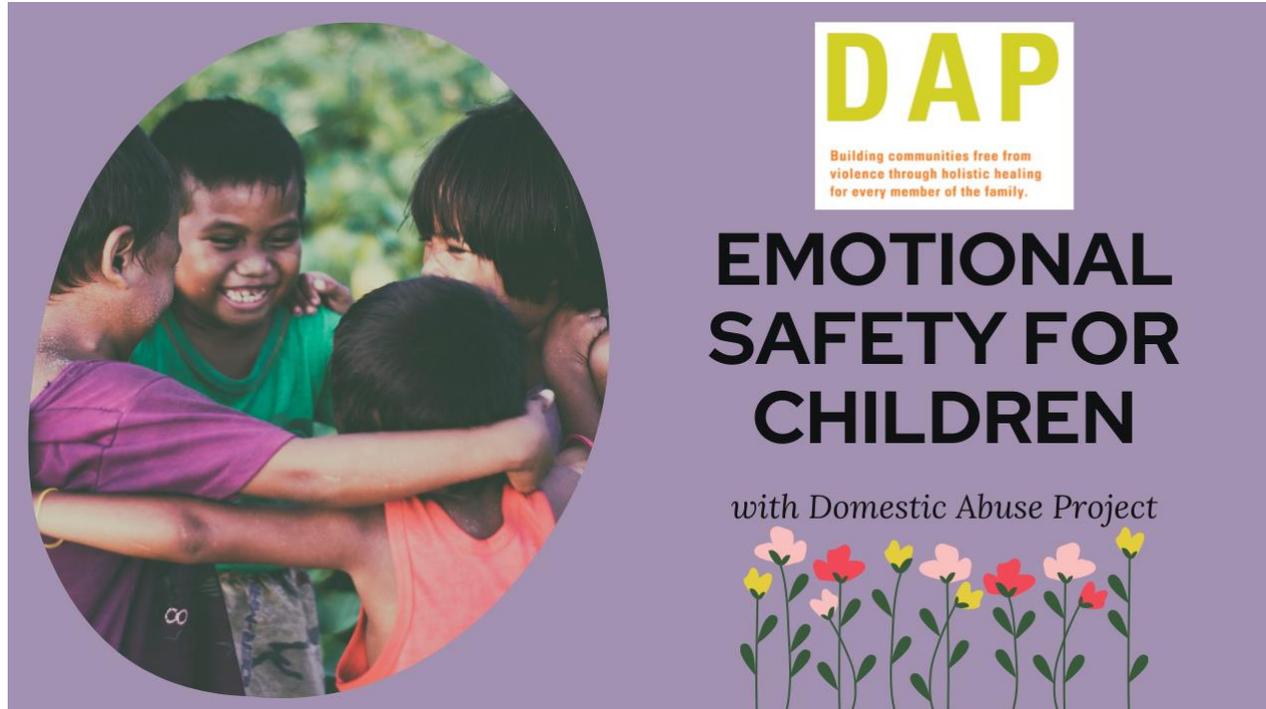


**Thank you for being here!**

**We will begin promptly at 10:00 AM CST.**



Mary Willis, MA,  
LPCC, and Sydney  
Koehler, BA

Domestic Abuse  
Project

**Please feel free to introduce yourself with  
your name, position, organization,  
and location!**

# Objectives

What does emotional safety mean for children?

- Overview of trauma and development

Why is emotional safety important for children?

How can parents and caregivers help their children to feel emotionally safe and demonstrate emotional safety?

How can parents and caregivers help children learn to self-soothe?

Developing an emotional safety plan for children



# Introductions

## Mary Willis, MA, LPCC

- Early Childhood Therapist, Domestic Abuse Project
- Mainly early childhood therapy clients, but also individual play therapy, facilitating support groups for caregivers and children who have witnessed domestic violence
- Background in day treatment, individual and family therapy, assessment and diagnosis

## Sydney Koehler, BA

- Case Management Intern, Domestic Abuse Project
- Work on DAP's First Call (resource) line, and provide short-term, stabilization-based case management for DAP clients (primarily housing)
- Graduated in 2020 from Boston College. Planning to attend law school in the future!

Type your name and position in the chat to introduce yourself!



# Emotional Safety

What is emotional safety?

- Type in chat

What does a child who is emotionally safe...

- Look like?
- Sound like?
- Feel like?



# An emotionally safe child looks, sounds, and feels like...

- Moving freely through the world without hesitation
- Able to reference adults (asking questions, pleasant interactions, shared joy) and get needs met
- Experiences and shares a range of emotions freely
- Can experience strong emotions and keep their body safe
  - Within developmental norms (i.e. most toddlers go through a hitting phase)
- Able to connect with new adults and form healthy relationships
- Sharing thoughts, feelings, questions openly without fear of criticism
- References emotions and connects feelings to actions
- Asks questions and learns from caregivers' emotional experiences
- Able to be vulnerable – admits mistakes, asks for help
- Is silly, goofy, creative, and able to share this with adults



Poll: How can we tell if a child doesn't have emotional safety?



# How can we tell if a child doesn't have emotional safety?

- Emotional explosions that seem disproportionate to situation or occur frequently
- Hides emotions, seems concerned that adults cannot help with strong emotions, “stuffs” emotions down/away
- Caretakes adults and their emotional reactions
- Only expresses emotions in certain settings or with certain caregivers/trusted adults
- Struggles to accept help or affection



What can  
cause a child to  
feel  
emotionally  
unsafe?

---

Lack of models of emotional safety

---

Lack of physical, mental/emotional safety

---

Caregivers who lack emotional safety

---

Basic needs being unmet

---

Sudden or frequent changes in circumstances

---

Traumatic experiences



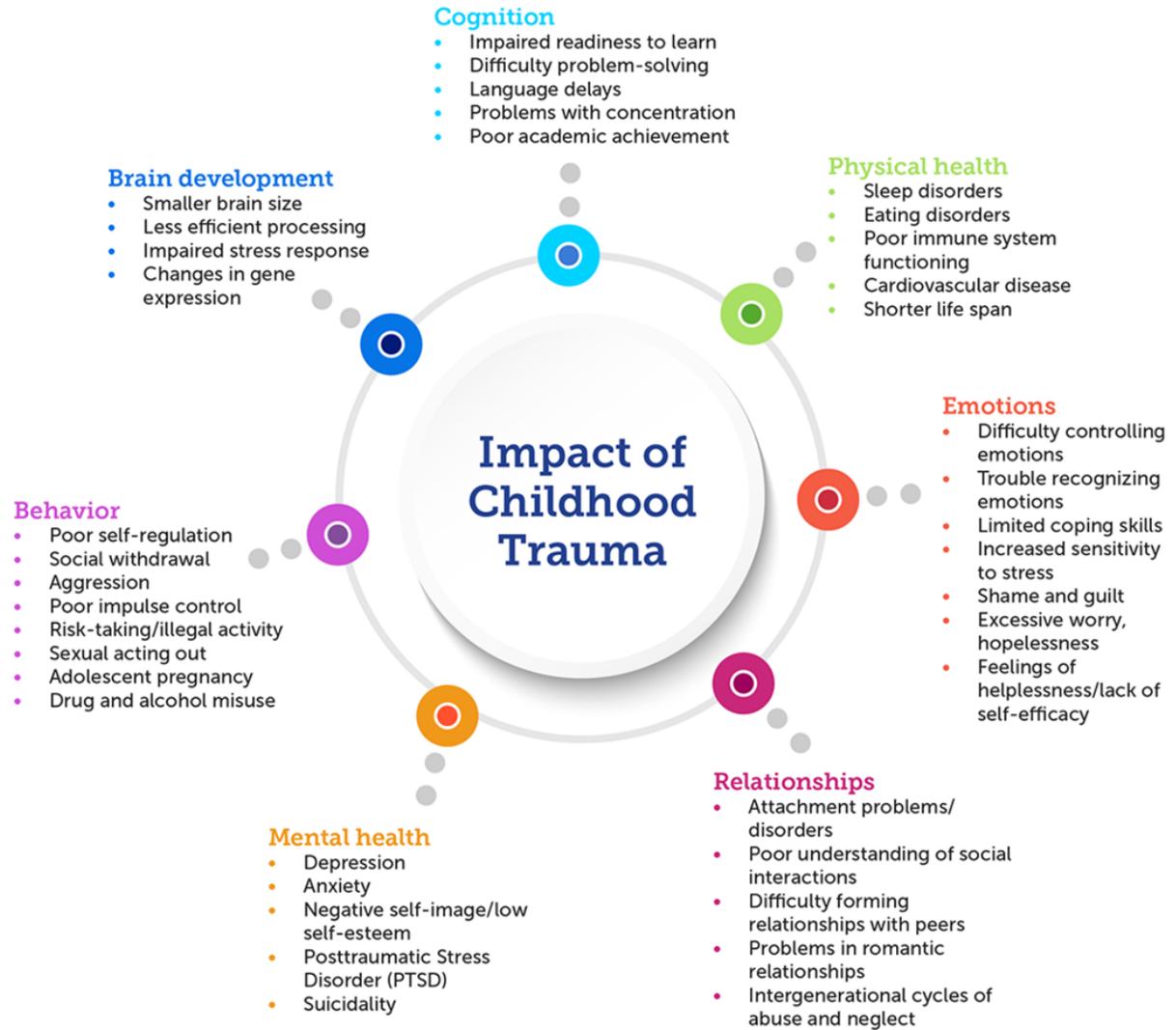
# Overview of trauma and development

Poll: How does trauma affect development?



# Impact of Childhood Trauma

## Overview of trauma and development



# Overview of trauma and development

## How does domestic violence affect child development?

- Anger outbursts, increased agitation, aggressive behavior
- Delayed developmental milestones
- Difficulty in perspective-taking/empathizing
- Difficulties building relationships with others (peers and adults)
- Academic difficulties, school difficulties
- Withdrawal or internalization
- Low self-esteem
- Shame, may feel responsible for abuse
- Fear of harm to self or others
- Need to caretake others or make others happy



# How is emotional safety affected in children who witness domestic violence?

- Poll: Have you noticed difficulties in emotional safety and regulation in children who have witnessed domestic violence?



# How is emotional safety affected in children who witness domestic violence?

- Feeling afraid to be vulnerable with others
- Needing to prioritize physical safety of self and others
- Not learning ways to regulate emotions safely; often, this is because they did not observe this from caregivers consistently
- May keep emotions suppressed until they cannot keep them inside anymore
- May share little bits with others, then pause to gauge their reaction



# How can we support emotional safety in children?

- Validating feelings
  - Gives children sense of control over their circumstances/emotions
  - Helps them to connect emotions and actions/experiences
  - Communicates that you're listening and value their opinion
- You tell four-year-old Freddie that he cannot have an extra-large Reese's blizzard at Dairy Queen. Freddie says, "I hate you, you're so mean!"
  - How would you validate this feeling? Type it in the chat!



# How can we support emotional safety in children?

- Asking questions
  - “How do you feel?”
  - “What was that like for you?”
  - “What are you thinking about?”
  - Respect no as an answer
  - Give them time to think/process
  - Keep it a little deal no matter what the outcome



# How can we support emotional safety in children?



## Modeling emotions

Narrating as they occur



## Modeling strategies

Deep breaths  
Taking a break  
Asking child to help choose how to cope with emotion



## Modeling sitting with difficult emotions

Don't always need to fix right away – isn't always possible



## Modeling vulnerability

Also involves sharing difficult emotions – anger, sadness, etc.  
Talking about hard or difficult things



# How can we support emotional safety in children?

- Give children space to feel big feelings!
  - Physical space – often, children feel more comfortable when they have room to move
  - Emotional space – allow them to experience whatever emotion they have without judgment
- Narrate emotions, actions
  - “You’re feeling so upset, you’re pulling all the blankets off your bed.”
  - “When you feel so sad, it feels good to hide under the couch.”
  - “Wow, it looks like you’re so excited you’re hanging upside-down from your curtain rod!”
- It is possible to narrate and maintain safety
  - “You are so mad you want to hit me. I’m going to stop your body. You can be mad but hurting others isn’t a choice.”



# Considerations for Grown-Ups in Children's Lives

- **How can social workers, teachers, and/or advocates help kids develop emotional safety?**
- Your space might be one where kids are able to let it out.
- Understand that parents are doing the very best that they can, and communicate this to them.
  - Parents often encounter blaming and/or shaming messages when experiencing domestic violence. Try to counter this narrative.
- Educate others in children's lives (teachers, other professionals and staff) about emotional safety and how to support kids who are developing emotional safety.
- Be curious! Wonder what kids' comments, actions, and words mean. See if you can be curious together with kids.
- Safety planning
  - Emotional
  - Physical



# Emotional safety during the holidays

- Generally, circumstances change during holidays
  - Covid-19 – less changes but still change
- Trauma-versaries, holidays without important adults
  - Different opinions within family – missing family members
- Prepare for emotional safety to decrease
  - Increased dysregulation, withdrawal
  - May need more support from caregivers
- Caretakers: try to maintain a routine, even simple one
  - Increased sense of control and predictability
- Create an emotional safety plan for child
  - Will talk about shortly



# Sensory Supports

- Calming/calm-down corners
  - Can be helpful
  - Ask: what is the purpose of it?
  - Need to be shown how to use it
  - Scale can change
- How can we support regulation with sensory supports?
  - Heavy work
  - Food (temperature, taste, texture)
  - Deep pressure
  - Auditory (headphones, white noise, music)
  - Tactile (rice bucket, orbeez, water play)
  - Smell (strongly scented items)
  - Occupational therapy evaluation may be helpful for children with consistent sensory needs



# How can we support children in self-soothing?

- What is the child already doing?
  - Many times, the child knows the answer to this better than we do
- Ask them – “what do you need right now?”
- Notice what helps the child to regulate, both specific actions or items and themes
  - For example, a child could get a drink of water, jump on the couch, and leave the room as regulatory activities
  - If the child does these things often, we could guess that cold temperatures, physical activity, and a change of space are helpful to them
- We can use these themes to try similar activities, and eventually, can add other regulatory activities to their “toolbox”



# Developing an Emotional Safety Plan/Self-Care Plan

My Emotional Safety Plan			
Made by:		Date:	
When I am feeling upset, I...	Feel:	Think:	Act:
I can talk to...			
I can go...			
I can do...			
If I think I might get hurt or someone else might get hurt, I can:			



# Questions?

## Follow Domestic Abuse Project on Social Media!

Follow us on Instagram: @dap\_mn

Like us on Facebook: Domestic Abuse Project MN

Follow us on Twitter: @DAPendsabuse

## Contact the Presenters:

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Sydney Koehler: [skoehler@mndap.org](mailto:skoehler@mndap.org)

Thank you for  
attending!

