

**Trauma in the Classroom: How Early Childhood Educators can Teach Children  
Facing Traumatic Experiences**

**An Honors Thesis (HONR490)**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

In America, there are hundreds of thousands of children that face traumatic experiences each year. Some may be displaced due to storms that roared through the area, while others may face strife caused by their own family members. Trauma can leave a lasting impact of the child, leading to problem behaviors in the classroom. Though teachers are accepting of everyone in the classroom, they are not given enough resources on how to support those facing these traumatic experiences. Looking into how topics such as abuse, the foster care system, natural disasters, death of a family member, bullying, and parental divorce affect children in early childhood education classroom, I was able to combat these behaviors in the classroom to help educators feel more prepared to help all populations.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank Professor Robin Box for advising me through this project. Her support, even through personal strife, motivated me to continue on with my thesis and make it into the accomplishment it is now.

I would also like to thank my boyfriend for his love during the late nights and early morning trying to juggle my hectic schedule.

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When trying to come up with an idea for my Honors Thesis, I was unsure where to start in the process. Like others in the Honors College, I wanted my thesis to be about a topic that I found interesting, while still pertaining to my major in Child Development. Through my college career, I have taken many classes that go over the stages of a child's life from gestation through age 8. I have learned about how typical children will grow and also some of the difficulties that children many face physically or emotionally. In addition, I have been prepared to teach this age group in an early childhood classroom. While these classes have briefly mentioned how children's development is affected by traumatic experiences, I never felt fully prepared to help these children in a classroom of my own. After looking even deeper into how to educate myself in better helping this group of children, I found that while there were a wide variety of options for parents of these children, there was very little to help teachers. This is what stemmed my interest in finding a way to share information that could help educators work with children that have experienced trauma.

The next step was choosing an advisor for my thesis. While many professors and advisors had come to mind for my project, I chose Robin Box because she is very knowledgeable in the Child Development department. Additionally, Mrs. Box had recently been extremely helpful in assisting me with finding an internship. I felt that she was a professor who I could bounce ideas off of and she could provide the assistance I needed to create my Honors Thesis. After sharing my interest with Mrs. Box, we decided the best way to get out information to a wide variety of individuals is through a website. The amount of information that could be included in a website is unlimited. A website can also be easily shared by simply sending a link. This way, my website could actually

have an impact by getting information out to any teacher all across America. This is the best way that my website could have the largest impact on those that need the information. After getting some inspiration from watching a webinar over helping children through traumatic experiences, I decided that I would include a video as well that covered general tips that could be used to help children that have experienced any form of trauma.

Mrs. Box and I had decided that we would meet each week as a way to track my progress. This helped me to stay accountable through creating my thesis. For the first week I started by creating a timeline to follow through the semester. I decided that each week I would pick one traumatic experience to make a page for on my website. This page would explain the side effects of the experience and how teacher's can interact with this child after they have been affected by that situation. To begin with, I picked some very common topics including bullying, abuse, natural disasters, death, suicide, and school shootings. One that first week, we went over this schedule. While we felt these were important topics, we decided it would be more credible if the website was written to fit the age group I'm qualified to work with. Since my degree covers birth through age 8, we decided to focus on this age group. Additionally, since we are focusing on educators, most of the information was geared toward those teaching preschool through age 8. After deciding this, we looked back at the topics chosen and made changes to better fit this group. For example, we decided to take out suicide because suicide typically affects adults. We also decided to take out school shootings because while this has happened in a preschool, Sandy Hook for instance, this tragedy typically happens in middle or high schools. We decided to keep bullying, abuse, natural disasters, and death. We

additionally added in foster care and divorce. I also placed plenty of room in my schedule so I could edit all of my website and write my process analysis.

The first topic I chose to write about was bullying. In my experience working at a daycare and preschool, I have found that there are bullies in every classroom. They may not steal lunch money and give swirlies, but they do reign supreme in the classroom as the ringleader. This child is the one that typically picks who gets to play with who, and leaves others to be isolated. They may choose to call another classmate a name and then encourages the other classmates to join in. I did some research into how this isolation and name-calling can affect a child and how it affects their self-confidence. From there, I came up with techniques to combat these common bullying situations, speaking to the children in developmentally appropriate ways. While at Ball State's Child Study Center, I was able to also practice this technique and found it to be effective. By bringing children into the conversation of why something is right or wrong, it helps teach them social skills that will be useful for problem solving in the future.

I also wanted to look into how educators themselves can be bullies. Adults may not even realize how the words they say affect a child's self-confidence. While working on my thesis, I had remembered that one of my friend's had complained about a nickname that his aunt had given him at a young age. Even though he is now 22 years old, he still shuttered hearing the name now. This showed me how even an endearing nickname could affect a child. I wanted to include this in my website because a teacher may make an innocent comment, unknowing to a child's insecurities. At Ball State's Child Study Center we spent a great deal working on intentional language. By being

more mindful of how you talk to children, educators can be more careful in what they say, being sure their message is clear and without conviction.

The next topic I decided to write on was natural disasters. In the past year, the East Coast and Gulf were hit by two major hurricanes, Hurricane Florence and Hurricane Michael. On the other side of the United States, wildfires roared through California destroying hundreds of towns. Through all this chaos, schools were also damaged and families were displaced. Not only can this cause emotional stress on the families, but also if only a few children are displaced, those in the classroom may question what happened to their friends. For this section I wanted to focus on how to prepare children ahead of time in case natural disasters are approaching. It also gives educators a look on how to keep each other connected and how to strengthen the relationships of those still in the classroom.

For my first two sections, I was simply typing out documents in Microsoft Word so I could transfer it onto my website at another time. This felt more like writing a paper rather than doing a creative project, slowing killing my motivation early in the process. From here I decided to take some time testing website creators. The first website I looked at was Wix. I chose one of the many premade templates and began to format the website into what I thought I wanted my website to look like. I chose a template that had dark colors since trauma tends to leave negative effects. After spending some time trying to format this website, I was having issues trying to figure out the program. I was not able to change one of the heading listed for a shopping website, totally ruining this attempt. I then moved on to Wordpress to see if I had better luck with this domain. I however came up short again, finding a program that costs money if you wanted anything extra

included. It also set up my website more like a blog than an information website. After giving myself nearly a week, I chose to give Wix another try since I had seen some of my peers use this website. I chose a different template this time, making a world of difference to my overall product. I chose the template labeled "Preschool" that came preset with multiple colors and pictures of children. I chose to keep this scheme as an attempt to make this topic more appealing. The bright colors help to combat the dim topics, making them easier to talk about. It also helps to bring out that this website's information focuses on a younger age.

After creating the website, I continued to make pages for each topic. My next topic was abuse. This section covered the different types of abuse and the warning signs for teachers. This was an important topic to cover because early childhood educators are typically the first people to see the child for an extended amount of time outside of the home. They are the first defense for if a child has been abused in their first few years of life. In my classes and at my internship, the main concern is being aware of the signs and knowing where to report this information. This is what I advised teachers to do as well, given that educators are not trained professionals to handle abuse. The goal of the teacher is to be an advocate for the child, so reporting is the best way to help your student in getting out of a possibly dangerous situation.

My next topic goes right along with abuse since foster care is typically the next step when abuse reports are substantiated. This sudden shift in care can be extremely challenging for a child. This section went hand-in-hand with a project I did with another class. I was able to do the research and present on how educators can guide those that have experienced foster care. I wanted to focus on the different types of relationships

children can have in the classroom. Through both research and personal experiences, I was able to come up with ideas on how teachers can build personal relationships with their student and how they can create activities that foster relationships between the students. I wanted the child to feel like they had connections, even if they were separated from their family.

Sometimes, trauma can come from even common events. My next topic I chose was about divorce. I had a friend in high school that even though her parents had been divorce since 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, she still had some built up resentment toward her dad because of the divorce. The rate of divorce is rising each year. This means that more children have to face the stress of parental divorce. This stress can be multiplied when the child is pinned between the two parties. While teachers can't stop a divorce from happening, a child may act out due to the pain they are feeling. This section went through ways that teachers can show compassion toward the child, allowing them to share their feelings in a nonjudgmental zone. It also offers ways to add the parents you'll deal with by finding ways to keep all parties informed. I think this can be a problem for teachers as well as students, because important information may not get passed along if parents are going through a messy divorce. By combating the problem at its root, teachers can look out for the child's well-being by providing information to both sets of parents.

My last topic to write about was on death. It's common for children at this age to have either a pet or a great-grandparent pass. This can be a hard concept for children to understand and sometimes a harder topic for parents to talk when emotionally distraught themselves. My grandmother unfortunately passed away this semester. I have a niece that is four years old, so my sister had to explain to her what death was. Being a cautious

parent, my sister chose careful words to explain that grandma had passed away. In response my niece said, "You mean grandma died. That's okay mom, everyone dies." My sister asked her where she learned that from and she said that her teacher had taught her. This showed how a teacher could impact a child's understanding of death. Though it may not make the feelings any less, it allows them to understand and takes a lot of stress off of the parent trying to explain the situation. After researching how the death of a family member affects a child and also speaking with Mrs. Box, a former preschool teacher, I was able to come up with ways that teachers can use class pets that may have shorter life spans, like fish, to teach children about death and the funeral process.

Once I had all of my topics, I used what I had written in these sections and did some additional research, to create my video. In order to create the video, I create a PowerPoint as if I were to present the information in front of a crowd. I then added additional notes into the PowerPoint itself if I wanted to go into more detail on any of the tips I gave. Since this was more of a broad overview, I decided to first give some common behaviors that children experiencing any type trauma may engage in. I then talked about how to combat these behaviors in the classroom. I split these sections up by age, including infants and toddlers, preschoolers, and early elementary age. Children go through a lot of major changes through these ages, so I felt it was important to share information that was relevant to each age group. From there I gave some general tips on how to help whole classroom traumas, or traumas that affect each child in the classroom instead of just one. This may involve giving lessons relevant to what trauma the class experienced so the children have a better understanding of what went on.

From here, I recorded my voice for each slide and timed each of my slides so they would change automatically when I was done talking. I made the style more like a webinar, though I was not talking in front of a large crowd. Since I do not take any media classes, this option seemed to best fit my skill, as well as making the tone more relaxing. I want those reading my information and watching this video to have an easy time with the information. These can be gruesome topics if you know of personal stories involving these traumas. However, if someone is uncomfortable reading what I wrote or watching my video, they will not continue to stay on the website and will not get the education that my website could provide.

The final step in creating my video was to save it in the right format. While this seems like the easiest step, this is where I had the most trouble. In my first attempt, I had ended up rerecord my voice so there were two voices speaking on each slide. I also had issues with my timing not linking to the video. In my second attempt to save my video in the right format, it had made my video, though it did not end up having the sound on it. Hours of work later, I was finally able to fix my problem by sending my PowerPoint to my email, getting on a separate computer, downloading it onto there, then saving it in the right format. Got to love technology.

The last section I wanted on my website was a recommending reading section. Books can be such a powerful way to explain situations with children. Each of these topics are hard for their own reasons, so as a teacher, it is nice to have resources to aid the conversation. This is also a way to open up communication for children because they are able to use the story characters to ask their own questions. I wanted my books to be easily accessible. In order to do this, I chose to go to a very well known retail website: Amazon.

I was able to type in key words like “children’s books on trauma,” and got tons of results. I then read through the books’ descriptions and chose which ones I felt were appropriate for this age group. I tried to get at least one book that covered each of my topics.

I then did the same thing with adult books but used key words like “books to help children with trauma.” I first got a lot of results on books for parents. Once I did find one book for teachers, the suggested reading section held more results relevant to helping educators. I chose a few suggestions that fit in with the age group I focused on and wrote descriptions on my own from what I had seen on each book. I added in a disclaimer on my main page for recommended reading that I had not read all of the books that I had suggested.

The final step in finishing my website was adding in sections on the main page of each section. I first started with my home page. I wrote a section first explaining what this website is so those that stumble upon it are able to understand it’s purpose. Here is where I state why teaching educators how to work with children that have experienced trauma is important and also that this website focuses on birth through age 8 since older children will need to be handled differently due to their development stage.

After I explained the website, I explained why I picked these topics. I gave a short overview on how these are common traumatic experiences that this age group will find, and also explained that it will give tips on how to support children from each topic.

I next gave a short overview on myself. I want those that find my website to know who I am and to give them a reason to trust what I have to say. While I may not be an expert on these topics, I have a background that supports children’s development and have done the research on how trauma affects the child as a whole. I also included my

future plans in case I wish to return to my website and continue adding to it. I finished this section by making a place to give my contact information. I made a special email in case others find my website and have questions in a certain area.

I also added sections on my next three main pages. For my overview video, I gave a quick description on what the video is. The topics section goes back over my main goal of educating teachers on these subject matters. It shares more on why I find this resource useful since there is a major lack of resources for teachers. The Recommended Reading section also gives a quick description on how books can be a useful resource in the classroom.

The hardest part in creating my thesis was finding the time. While I did have a schedule, I often found myself changing it to better fit with what was going on that week. I have been spread thin between 19 credit hours, a 200-hour internship, and working two jobs. By the time I sat down to work on my thesis, I was physically and mentally exhausted to work on it. In addition, I missed two separate meetings due to sickness and faced emotional hardship with my grandmother passing. All of this while also trying to figure out my next steps after finishing my undergraduate was nearly impossible. I got off track, but with the support of my advisor, I will thankfully be finishing my thesis.

Having alluded to trying to figure out my future steps, I am pleased to say that I will be continuing my education at Ball State University by receiving my Master's in Social Work. I would not have been driven to this decision without having done my thesis and researching more into childhood trauma. This interest and my desire to help this population led me to looking into Social Work and falling in love with the careers this opportunity gives me. Thanks to my thesis, I was able to connect research and

experience to help the children I have come in contact with and will be able to continue this throughout my future career.

Link to website:

<https://mollichallis.wixsite.com/trauma>

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