

# AIEJI World Congress 2025



## Autism and Developmental Trauma

Copenhagen May 20th 2025  
10.00 – 10.45

Anders Bonderup Kirstein, Psychologist and VISO-specialist

Email: [abk@skolensputnik.dk](mailto:abk@skolensputnik.dk)

[www.kursuscentersputnik.dk](http://www.kursuscentersputnik.dk)

# Some things we know ...

- Early neglect and developmental trauma can lead to severe and lasting consequences
- Including impacts on cognitive, emotional and sensorimotor development
- This can include distinct syndromes of both autistic and ADHD traits
- It can be difficult to distinguish between the effects of developmental trauma and autism
- Diagnoses may overshadow underlying trauma reactions
- Autistic traits increase vulnerability to trauma and neglect, reducing the ability to cope with trauma and utilize support

# Across symptoms and diagnoses...

Vulnerability  
to stress?

Attachment?

Trauma?

Mentalizing  
and affect-  
regulation?

# Understanding trauma

# DEFINITIONS OF TRAUMA

- *"An experience that can influence the way your stress response works and as a result has longtime impact on the person" - Dr. Bruce Perry*
- *"Trauma is not what happens to you. Trauma is **what happens inside of you**, as a result of what happened to you." - Dr. Gabor Maté*
- *"Trauma is not the story of what happened a long time ago. Trauma is residue that's living inside of you now." - Dr. Bessel van der Kolk*

# Aspects of trauma

Event

Experience

Reaction

# WHAT IS TRAUMA?

An experience where we become paralyzed and overwhelmed

Overwhelming emotions – often intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation (physically or psychologically)

When our adaptive abilities and coping strategies fall short, and we feel helpless

Violation of boundaries, disruption of our connection to others or to ourselves

# Types of trauma

Non-personal  
trauma

Interpersonal  
trauma

Attachment  
trauma

# Factors influencing traumatization ?

- Intensity, duration, and repetitions of the traumatic event
- Life circumstances at the time of the traumatic event
- Supportive environment (family, friends, network, teachers)
- Physical and personal prerequisites, personality, learned skills
- Previous traumatic experiences
- Attachment patterns and experiences
- Mentalizing capacity

# Trauma vulnerability factors common in autism?

Mentalizing difficulties

Emotional regulation problems

Limited ability to benefit from  
social support & services

Sensitivity to stress and changes  
associated with trauma

# Developmental Trauma

# Types of Developmental Trauma

Natural  
catastrophes,  
war, famine

Bullying, social  
exclusion

Neglect /  
Attachment  
trauma

# Developmental Trauma and Attachment



- Close connection between developmental trauma and attachment
- The most common and significant developmental traumas are attachment traumas
- In general, the quality of attachment influences risk of traumatization

# Attachment

John Bowlby



Second Edition

## The importance of early attachment

- Essential for neurobiological development of social-cognitive skills
- Critical for self-regulation and emotional regulation
- Vital for the healthy and optimal development of attention and concentration

# How Common is Neglect and Abuse?

- At least 10% of children and adolescents experience neglect and abuse during childhood (Danish and international studies).
- 19% of Danish schoolchildren (5th–9th grade) report experiencing violence (2009).
- 17% of Danish 14–15-year-olds experienced domestic violence within the past year (2020).
- Approximately 2% of Danish children experience severe sexual abuse combined with psychological and physical maltreatment and neglect (2014).
- Internationally, about 18% of females and 8% of males report some form of sexual abuse before age 18.
- 2.3% of children aged 7–18 diagnosed with PTSD (Denmark, 2024).

# Documented Effects of Early Neglect and Repeated Traumatic Stress

---

Significantly increased risk of:

- Attachment disorders
- Emotion regulation difficulties
- Mentalizing impairments
- Difficulties in social adaptation and peer relationships
- Difficulties in mutual close relationships, including in parenting skills
- Cognitive developmental delays and impairments
- Behavioral and attentional disorders with hyperactivity
- Autism-like reactions and behaviors



# TRAUMA REACTIONS

# Possible Trauma Symptoms?

Shame

Dissociation

Emptiness, sadness

Inertia, fatigue, lethargy, emotional shutdown

Stress

Reduced concentration

Irritability and anger

Anxiety and anxiousness

Substance abuse

Distrust and social withdrawal

# Trauma Approaches

Non-  
trauma-informed  
approach

Trauma-  
informed  
approach

Trauma-specific  
approach

# Trauma- informed approach

Awareness of trauma's impact on emotions, actions, and challenges

Recognize signs of trauma

Respond appropriately to traumatized individuals

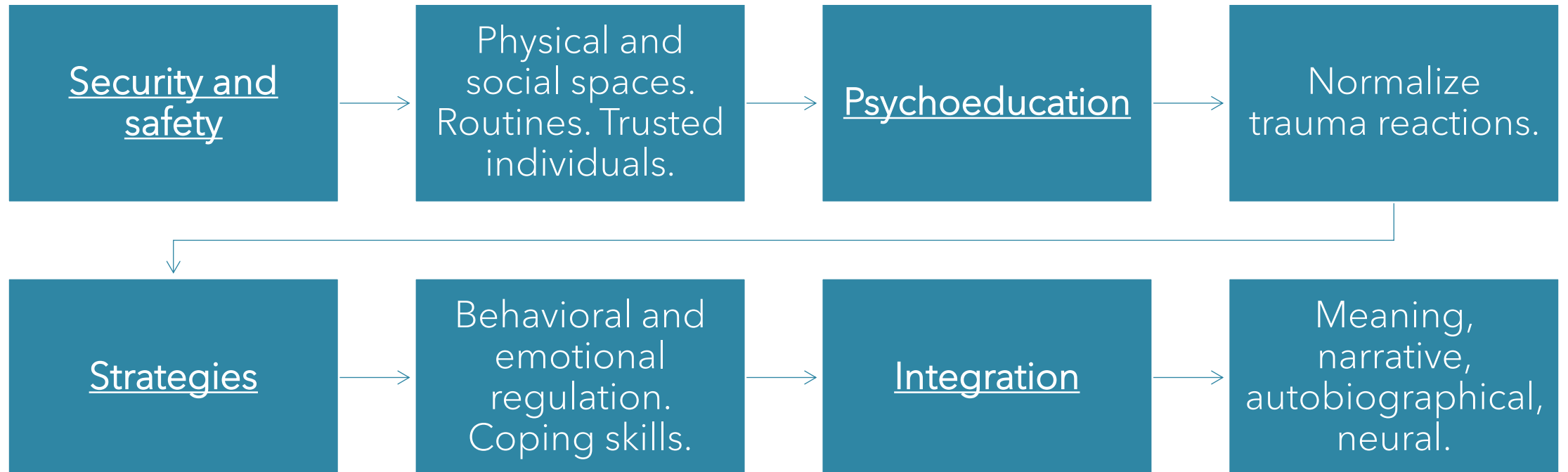
Prevent triggering trauma reactions

# Hierarchy of Trauma Interventions

1. Safety & Security
2. External regulation
3. Self-regulation
4. Processing or integration



# Approaches?



# Understanding and Connection

- People in traumatic situations **do the best they can** to protect themselves
- Opposite of trauma is connection to others
- Crucial not to feel isolated
- Stigma and avoidance worsen feelings of shame
- We need to balance fear of retraumatization vs. "pressure to reveal everything"



# Thank you for your time!

Kursuscenter Sputnik

