The Impact of Trauma on a Child’s Ability to Learn

Interview with Joel Ristuccia Ed.M, Massachusetts Advocates for Children

Interviewed by Ken Huey, Ph.D., Founder of CALO/ATN Board Member

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Transcript: Ristuccia

Ken: Hello everyone. I’m Dr. Ken Huey of CALO, a residential treatment center for adopted children from the ages of 9 to 18. Our kids struggle with emotional and behavioural issues and they have a trauma background.

Today we are here to talk with Joe Ristuccia, another interview from the Educating Traumatized Children Summit: An online gathering of expert voices on how to provide trauma-sensitive school experience to children. This summit has been created by the Attachment and Trauma Network.

As I said, we are here with Joe Ristuccia and we are going to talk about the impact of trauma and the importance of trauma sensitive schools on a child’s ability to learn. Joe Ristuccia is a certified school psychologist who, with over 25 years’ experience working in the public schools, over the last 20 years he has worked with students at risk for failure due to social, behavioural and emotional difficulties. Mr. Ristuccia has served as consultant on the impact of trauma on student learning to the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, TLPI, and is a co-author of Helping Traumatized Children Learn.

Additionally, he has consulted to the Department of School Psychiatry, Massachusetts General Hospital, presented program model research findings at the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), presented for the Departments of Education in Massachusetts, Wisconsin, West Virginia and Washington as well as the University of Wisconsin on topics related to the impact of trauma on learning and on the role of trauma and student behaviours that can lead to punitive discipline and school failure.

Mr. Ristuccia is an Adjunct Professor at Lesley University teaching courses in developing trauma sensitive school-wide, classroom and individual interventions to support all students to be successful in the general education curriculum. Mr. Ristuccia holds an Ed.M. from Harvard University and a B.A. from Yale. Joe, welcome.

Joe: Kenneth it’s really a delight to be here and happy to be a part of your program. Thank you.

Ken: You bet. Well, let’s jump right in. How widespread is the problem of early childhood trauma?

1- Ristuccia, Joe
Joe: Well, I think prevalence is one of the key issues for people to know and understand, to really get to why we spend so much of our resources and time talking about trauma and trauma sensitive schools. If you look at the Adverse Childhood Experience studies done by Anda and Felitti, I think they gave a very good view as to the prevalence of traumatic experience and that it is much higher than any educators would have thought. Their studies show that fifty per cent of our school age children experience physical, emotional, sexual abuse, witness domestic violence, have significant substance abuse and mental illness in their homes, as well as maybe living with folks in the home who have been to prison and have been involved significantly with the law.

And if you add to these, you know, they looked at a specific number of categories, if you add to these issues such as neglect, being chronically bullied in school, periods of homelessness, living in a neighborhood where there is a significant amount of community violence, refugees from areas of war, medical issues, acrimonious divorce, you think of all the other areas and experiences that students have, you begin to understand that traumatic experience is a significant part of a lot of our students' lives and it is much more than... the majority of students have been affected by significant adversity.

I think it is also important when we talk about prevalence to understand what we mean by trauma and traumatic experience. Experts explain that trauma is not the event itself. It is not an event but...

Ken: Yeah.

Joe: it’s rather how we respond to that event. And that it’s a response that is characterized by feeling overwhelmed and our ability to cope is dramatically undermined. And that these experiences in childhood can lead to a cascade of social, emotional and cognitive difficulties which not only can impact school success but can lead to the adoption of high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse, sexual promiscuity, cutting, eating disorders and other related pieces.

Ken: Yeah.

Joe: So...

Ken: Alright, so quite a wide range of issues coming into that.

Joe: Yes.

Ken: What kind of locations does this early childhood trauma have for school systems?

Joe: I think for the impact on school systems and student learning can be quite significant and I think I want to start by talking a little bit about just an overview of some of the neurobiological epigenetic and psychological impacts of these experiences on kids because I think it is important to understand that students impacted by traumatic...
experience act, behave and learn the way they do because of the very real impacts this has on who they are and how they have developed.

Neurobiologically, if you look at some of the impacts that these experiences can have, students with significant and traumatic experience could be impacted first in the size of different brain systems that they have, systems that can impact language, memory, particularly sequential memory.

In addition to that, it also can impact how they use different parts of the brain. And if you think about students in schools, we want them to be thoughtful, we want them to be analytically and critically thinking about the material they are reading, the material we are discussing so we want them to be in that thoughtful part of their brain, in that...so that neocortex, that upper part of the brain.

A lot of the trauma response of the limbic system lives in the very primitive part of the brain that is the more reactive part of the brain. So oftentimes students with significant traumatic experience come to school and they are not operating in the thoughtful part of the brain, they are really operating in the reactive part. So they might present in class as being over reactive, responding inappropriately to very mild to moderate stress indicators and so that it is difficult for them to settle and really engage in that critical thinking and learning that we’d like them to have.

I think that last piece I’d want to mention is that students with significant traumatic experience often are on a daily rollercoaster of stress hormone injection into their bloodstream and absorption out. So they are on this rollercoaster of very high levels of stress hormones and very low levels of stress hormones which can certainly impact their ability to focus as well as their behaviour and presentation. So there are these sort of core neurobiological, if you will physiological impact that traumatic experience can have on kids and again this is just an overview. There are a lot more research and a lot more detail on some of it.

But I want to get to...so what does that look like in school? How does that affect the student in school, and I want to begin really looking at the...and I want to talk about the academic impacts, the behavioural impacts and then the impact on student’s ability to relate and connect.

Ken:  Great. Great.

Joe:  And academically I want to talk about 2 areas...I want to talk about academics in 2 ways. The first is what I call core skills or core academic skills. Oftentimes and again as I talk through these, I want to be clear. Not every student with significant traumatic experience is going to demonstrate all of these but I think you’ll see certainly educators will see that it only takes one or two to put the student at significant risk for school failure. And so when we look at core academic skills, the first thing I would look at would be language; verbal expressive, written, reading as well as non-verbal language and interpretation of non-verbal cues. In addition to that it can have a significant impact
on memory particularly sequential memory, that ability to order and organize information.

In addition to some of those basic fundamental academic skills, they can also impact academic learning, or if you will learning process. And here I talk first about executive function. Executive function being that process, that goal directive process that underlies everything we do, not just in academics but in all parts of our life’s social and otherwise. And it is that process of setting a goal, developing a plan to achieve that goal, executing the plan and then reviewing that plan to see – or our actions – to see if we achieved what we wanted to, and if we did, to store that away, and if we didn’t, maybe to make some adaptations to the plan and so the next time we are presented with the plan…you know we have a more effective approach.

And of course, what I just described was a process that involves explicit thinking in the development of a learned and remembered sequence of chronology. And students who struggle with memory, particularly sequential memory are going to have a very difficult time with executive function. So oftentimes those executive function pieces or skills are not just well developed and need to be explicitly taught.

The second piece is transitions. Kids with significant traumatic experience can have some difficulty with transitions. If you think of a student coming into a classroom and they sit in that classroom, oftentimes in the midst of all that noise and what-not they are scanning for potential danger. So they will spend a lot of their energy and time hearing what’s going on in the hallway, how close is the teacher coming, what’s the tone of voice, who is approaching me, is there someone behind me?

And so as they’re scanning – really scanning to make sure that they’re going to be okay and that there aren’t any threats in the room – the class is settling, papers might be handed out and that at some point as things quiet the student stops the scanning process and looks and things are quieted down because people are in class and now they are doing an assignment that has been handed out. And so the student looks down and there is a paper in front of them. And it would be great in this situation, I think if the student could raise their hand and say, “Excuse me, I’ve been somewhat hypervigilant here in this classroom just making sure that I’m going to be okay. And I really don’t know what this assignment is about, so if you could redo the instructions, I’d like to get to it.” But of course students don’t do that, right.

Ken: Yeah.

Joe: In the best of circumstance what you get is a student that has learned some splinter skills to get through the class, name, date – I’m sure there’s a date written somewhere – is there a word bank I’m drawing from, I wonder what my neighbor is doing but then I’d probably get told don’t worry you can do it yourself, don’t copy your neighbor. But they develop these skills to get through the class. And so, they are not really developing that framework for academic and cognitive skill development. They’re learning how to get through so they can make it to the next one. And that is in the best case.
In some cases you might get pushback. You might get a student who says, “I’m not doing any work today.” You might get a student who rips the paper in half and throws it on the floor. You might get that kind of pushback as students try to control that situation. So that transition...

Ken: Talk about that situation. Tearing the paper in half...

Joe: Sure.

Ken: So, they’re ripping the paper in half, what do you think is going on then? You are painting a picture of specific behaviours we might see. Fantastic.

Joe: Mhm.

Ken: If you can tie those together, the sort of executive, the functioning, sequential memory and what those...

Joe: Yeah

Ken: ... behaviors that we are seeing, what that picture might look like, that’s really helpful.

Joe: Yeah. I think that oftentimes the pushback we see from students particularly in those academic, in that situation I just described, many times for me that’s the student trying to exert some control in that situation to minimize their sense of unease or dis-ease in that situation and so better to push back and say, “I’m not doing it” than to have the paper, not having heard the instructions and not being able to execute the task in a successful manner.

Ken: Mhm, okay.

Joe: There is that piece. And then, the last piece to me is attention. Oftentimes a lot of students will carry particularly with traumatic experience, will carry an ADHD diagnosis, but if you think of what I just described of that student coming into the classroom, it’s not that he is not paying attention or she is not paying attention, it is that they are paying attention to all the wrong things.

Ken: Sure.

Joe: They are paying attention to tone of voice, to things they may perceive as a potential threat. And so I worked with a student in the fourth grade and as I was walking down the hallway one day this teacher popped her head out of the room and said, “Would you mind spending some time with Jon because he just – he doesn’t seem to be here today. And we went for a walk and found some space and sat, and I said, “What’s up?” And he said, “Do you hear that sound?”

Now he is hearing this sound that I stopped and listened and I can’t hear it. I say, “Tell me what it sounds like.” And he said, “It’s sort of a rumble.” And I listened again and...
then I hear this sound of – a very faint sound of far off heavy equipment. And I say, “You mean that sound?” He goes, “Yes.” He said, “Do you think they’d going to dig a hole and hit the gas pipe and it’s going to blow up the school like what happened on Elm Street last week?”

Well, the previous week in town, they had been digging in the street, they hit a gas pipe, leaked gas into the neighboring house and it blew the house up. Now there was no one in the house so there were no injuries. But the student heard that and remembered that, comes to school...

Ken: Yeah.

Joe: He's been hearing this very faint noise and is immediately thinking, “Oh my gosh, are they going to dig and hit a pipe, are they going to dig and hit a pipe…”

Ken: Yeah.

Joe: We were able to go out, visit the driver. He asked the driver the question, the driver said, “I’m spreading, I’m not digging.” He relaxed and came back into school but I think it’s illustrative of the student’s paying attention to things that sometimes we are not aware of, you know we're constantly filtering that extraneous stuff out. But they might be focused on what we’re not aware of, we don’t know where this disconnection is coming from but in fact when you can get with the student and talk to them, you begin to understand that for them this is very real, whether it’s in fact real or perceived as real by them the point is that they are focused there and it is impacting their ability to focus.

Ken: Absolutely.

Joe: And so that’s...so of the learning process, it is executive function, it is transitions and it is attention and again paying attention to the relevant information in school and in class as opposed to irrelevant to the learning process information but very relevant to the student.

So that is sort of the academic piece. But then there is a behavioral piece that students bring in and you know, probably the most obvious to educators is that student who is very reactive, very impulsive. That student I described in transitioning into the classroom, who might actually tear a paper in half or push it off the desk or say that I’m not doing a paper or a test today, that sort of impulsive, not thoughtful sort of reaction back. You can get that and see that in the students and that involves also some emotional ability. They may switch emotion from very happy to very sad in a very quick fashion.

The second most noticeable behavior is that pushback behavior that “No, not today, thanks anyway.” They may use more colorful language than that, but I think you know what I am talking about.
They are exerting a little bit of resistance, a little bit of pushback to try and gain some control as we talked about a few minutes ago. But there is a third group and to be honest, those 2 groups – I like those 2 groups. In fact I enjoy working with them but I really appreciate the fact that it’s as if they are raising their hands saying, “I’m having a problem. Hey, over here.”

Ken: Oh, I see.

Joe: Everything is so...

Ken: The signs are so obvious.

Joe: Yeah, I mean they put it right out there. But that third group is a harder group because they’ve learned to fly under the radar.

Ken: Mhm.

Joe: Don’t make any waves, don’t say anything, take it all inside, keep it quiet and I’m going to be okay. And so for them – in fact, I worked for the Young men. One of the first jobs I had is a Psychologist in schools. I was in the guidance office and the guidance secretary took it upon herself to introduce me around to regular kids. And one of these kids I met – we got along quite well and we would talk sports and just stuff and he dropped by the office every morning before school and we would chat for a few minutes and then he’d go off to class. He did that with me, I wasn’t working with him, he was just visiting me for a couple of years. He graduated and I never thought anything about it. This was an average kid in the school.

Twelve years after he graduated I got a letter from him thanking me for being there. That in fact his dad had been physically abusing him. School was his safe place and I was the transition back to school from home.

Ken: Amazing.

Joe: I was his chance to sort of breathe and say, “I’m going to be okay.” None of us had any idea that this was going on with this kid. No one in town, in school, no one had any clue about what was actually going on.

Ken: Yeah.

Joe: And so these kids are there. You’ve got these kids who are right up front with it, either in their impulsive reactive behavior, in their aggressive pushback behavior but you’ve also got kids flying under the radar. And before I leave the behavior thing, I want to make 2 points. One is, that a lot of these behaviors we see in kids is their attempt to try to keep themselves safe, right?

Ken: Yeah.
Joe: Controlling situations, reacting, staying under the radar…and the other piece is that not every student that presents as I have just described is necessarily a student with a significant traumatic experience background. I want to be clear about that differentiation.

Ken: Yeah.

Joe: So the last piece I want to talk about is student relationships in school and…

Ken: Okay.

Joe: The behaviors that I have talked about in terms of the executive function, transitions, that mood shift that sort of aggressive demeanor or even that flying under the radar – these behaviors, these characteristics of how they learn are also part of their interaction patterns with others. And if you think about someone who you are working to be a friend with, or working to relate to and they are not understanding how you’re feeling, they are not responding, they have rapid unexpected mood shifts, maybe they have got some language issues and they can’t really tell a joke or they can’t tell a story, it’s really difficult for these students to really create the kind of friendships and relationships that other people might have. And that’s with peers as well as with adults.

So oftentimes, their relationships are or can be significantly impacted.

Ken: Even in that situation, the social situation – they’re not paying attention to the most important social cues because they are so hypervigilant and missing the boat then.

Joe: Yeah. Exactly, exactly.

Ken: Okay, so now we’ve got all these impacts...

Joe: Yeah.

Ken: all over in the student arena. How do trauma sensitive schools address these needs?

Joe: That is really to me…to us at TLPI and to me, the key piece and that I think you start with…there’s really 2 elements to how trauma sensitive schools address the needs of kids and help them to be successful. The first is how we think about students. We need to think about students as the whole child, that students are more than just academic achievement machines that we need to think of students in terms of their competencies both academic and otherwise, we need to think about students in terms of their ability to regulate their emotions as well as their behaviour, students in terms of their relationships with adults, peers both inside of school and outside of school and also physical health and well-being of the students.

And we came to this concept of whole child initially in the project by really looking at so what do developmental and trauma psychologists say about the key components that
underlie the health of students, children and students. And they talked in different words, Ken but they talked about the same concepts – attachment to a relationship. They talked about regulation, they talked about competency or strengths and those types of issues and that we use that in some of our initial work and also begin to realize that the physical health and well-being of the child was also an important piece.

And so we think of this – we refer to these as our four domains for students. I think a better way to think of it or a more common way to think about it is to think in terms of the whole child. So we start...

Ken: Yeah.

Joe: by the needs of the whole child and that trauma sensitive schools are schools that address the needs of the whole child and really are characterized by the following attributes if you will. That there is a shared understanding in the school among all staff and all staff includes not only professional staff but not professional staff as well. That everyone in that school understands the potential impact of traumatic experience on students. So they are aware. They don’t have to be experts but they need to be aware of what that is. And that schools – one of the most important things that they can do is to support all children to feel safe physically, socially, emotionally and academically.

Ken: Mhm.

Joe: Children’s traumatic responses and the associated difficulties are often rooted in real or perceived threats, things that we’ve talked about. And so the first step is to really help them feel safe in the classroom, on the playground, in the hallway, the cafeteria, the bus, the gym...wherever they are going to be in school and in the system of school and again safety, not just physical safety but also social and emotional safety and in class, that academic safety where they feel okay sort of taking that risk; kind of stepping out of their comfort zone and taking the risk.

Ken: Yeah.

Joe: So that safety is one of those – is that second attribute. The third is that, again we address the need of the whole child in the school, not just the academic child. And a trauma sensitive school really recognizes the interconnectedness of these components that we call the whole child. You know I can talk about them individually, Ken but in the child, they are all interwoven and integrated.

Ken: Sure.

Joe: I worked in a school with a student, in a school in an urban city and there was a student who had some good academic skills or certainly grade-level academic skills, he wasn’t doing any work. And we were working real hard to figure out how to help the student to actually do work in school.
Joe: And the student, it was a grammar school case right, and the student really wasn’t doing much work. He was not disrupted, he...

Ken: Sure.

Joe: ... Was not interfering with others. I mean, he wasn’t doing work so that in itself could be interfering in a class. But he wasn’t actively disruptive.

Ken: Yeah. Okay.

Joe: And actually, we thought about this student and tried different things out. We stepped back and said, “Well, let’s take a look at the whole child.” And, he was fairly well regulated, he had decent academic competencies and skills but when you look at his relationships, Ken he had none. None in school. Not that he didn’t...

Ken: Yeah.

Joe: know any kids and teachers but he didn’t hang out with anyone. There were no close relationships. We spoke to his...

Ken: Mhm.

Joe: ... mom and dad and they said, same way at home. He’s really not...

Ken: Sure.

Joe: ... related. And so what we did in school is he fashioned himself a basketball star – he was too young to play on the seventh and eighth grade team, but the coach said, “I’ll take him on as a manager.” So the coach then...

Ken: Uh huh.

Joe: ... took that perceived competency, leveraged it to begin that developed relationship with the student and said, “Whose class are you in?” “Oh, I’m in Miss McGillicuddy’s class.” “Oh, she’s a friend of mine. Say hello for me and your instructional assistant?” “Yeah.” “It’s Mr. Bill. Say hi to him.” And you know, he started to get connected in the course on the team, he’s knowing seventh and eighth graders, they are saying hello to him in the hallway and he’s developing...

Ken: Yeah.

Joe: ... relationship and feeling more connected to the community, he starts doing some work. Now did he do all his work all the time? No, but now he was getting work done and now we had the beginning of some traction to begin to engage him in work, because he was a bright kid and a competent student.
So it is that again, that whole child, these pieces all relate and sometimes the key to academics is not necessarily time and learning, and I want to be clear, I’m a fan of time and learning. But sometimes it is one of those other elements of the whole child that is the key to getting us to engage them in the learning process.

Joe: Yeah.

Ken: And I think that story also emphasizes the next point which is the importance of connecting kids to the community. How do we draw them into the community? How do we create a culture in the school that is a culture of acceptance and tolerance? – Individual student supports and policies that not only support kids but also support their connection to the school community. So often we do pull-outs and that type of thing that tend to isolate kids. How do we set that up in a way that it tends to bring kids more into the community?

Ken: Sure.

Joe: It is a very important piece connecting them to the community. The school embraces teamwork and its staff share responsibility for all kids. You can’t address the needs of these kids just with classroom teachers. They need to be part of a community, and the community that shares, that sort of asks the question if you will, shares responsibility, what can we do as a community to support our children, to help them feel safe, participate fully in our school? That is, you know that the school embraces these kids as our kids. That trauma sensitive schools really helps staff really inside and outside the school to be strong supportive professional community that is addressing the needs of the children in solving some of the issues that they present.

Ken: Correct.

Joe: Last, but...yeah, I’m sorry.

Ken: Well, there is this term whole school or a whole school approach. That’s really what we are talking about then.

Joe: Yes.

Ken: Okay.

Joe: It is definitely whole school and I guess the exclamation point to whole school is that leadership and staff really can adapt to the ever changing need of the student and the community. I mean if there is one constant in schools, it is change. And so...

Ken: Yeah.

Joe: ... are we aware of the changes that are coming, whether it is a state mandate from the Department of Ed, whether it is a community initiative that is going to shift or things we
want to do in school – what are they going to be, how is it going to affect our students and how do we work together to really address that as a community?

So community is a community to connection and then the adaptability and the ability to meet the ever changing needs are key points as well. So those elements, that awareness, that sense of safety, that connection of the student, addressing the whole child working together as a team and then being adaptable to the ever changing environment that schools operate in – that those are really cornerstone attributes of creating a whole school trauma sensitive school community.

Ken: Yes. So one part that you talked about is creating the safety...

Joe: Mhm.

Ken: If I could discuss it back to that first section...

Joe: Sure.

Ken: ask really how, what are some strategies for creating the safety before the social support for instance, to get a child to be able to feel – you talked about this one child that…it was really kind of guided through that process, but in general, how do you create safety for a kid?

Joe: Yeah, safety is, you know for students, a lot of it is about structure and predictability; How do we help students understand what the day is going to look like, what that flow is going to look like, who do they have that they are connected to, that if an issue comes up that they can look to that individual to answer a question, to support them if they’re feeling a little upset or put off by a change in that schedule, that predictability. But it’s about predictability, it’s about structure, it’s about clear limits and expectations and knowing where those limits are, and if I test those limits that there is a – not just a punitive response – but there is a restorative response that helps me learn where that limit is that helps then reconnect me back to the community to recover if you will from that…from moving across that boundary and continue to move ahead being part of that community.

And I would also say that safety and connection, safety and relationships if you will and connections to the community are really intertwined. I talk about them separately but it’s almost like the whole child piece. They really interact in a very...

Ken: Yeah.

Joe: …intricate way.

Ken: Yeah. Okay so, one last question for you.

Joe: Sure.
Joe: If I’m an educator, I’m here listening to this as a teacher administrator, what shall I be doing next to make sure that my school is trauma sensitive?

Joe: Yes, you know that’s a great question and TLPI has done a lot of work to try and answer that question and I would throw out that there are a couple of things that you can do. There is no expense involved and it’s really furthering your knowledge and information as well as beginning to see what this road looks like, how do I get from point A to point B?

And the first is, you know my recommendation would be that you read The Purple Book: Helping Traumatized Children Learn, Volume 1. It really gives a much deeper better understanding or better explanation if you will of the impacts of trauma on kids and their learning.

The second thing is I would suggest that you read chapter 1 of Helping Traumatized Children Learn, Volume 2 which really is an overview of creating trauma sensitive schools so it gives you the key tools and the processes and what-not that tie into that. These publications, by the way I want to be clear. They are available for no cost as PDF downloads on our website. I don’t want this to sound like I’m...

Joe: ... selling books. I’m not...

Ken: Yeah you know exactly...

Joe: I am recommending resources that are available in the website, I could give you that as well. It’s www.traumasensitiveschools.org. So that is www.traumasensitiveschools.org. You can download those PDFs for free. It’s there and...

Ken: Yeah

Joe: ... it’s for you to take. I think the last piece would also be to join the coalition. You can do it through the website and by doing that, it can kind of puts you on the loop. It keeps you aware, it keeps you informed, and keeps you as part of this work as we are moving forward.

Ken: Mhm.

Joe: So it’s education through the resources, it’s being aware of the website and accessing it and then it is in fact joining that coalition and really taking a step to be a part of it. And of course, we are available to answer questions, to support, to guide in any way that we can to help anyone who is interested in doing it.

Ken: Fantastic. Thank you Joe Ristuccia so much for joining us today. I really do appreciate it – the hypervigilance, it’s not that they aren’t paying attention they’re not, they’re paying...
attention to all the wrong things, the whole child concept – really some great, great stuff. I very, very much appreciate it. Thank you.

Joe: Thank you. It’s a pleasure being with you.

Ken: Alright. This is Dr. Ken Huey of CALO for ATN’s Traumatized Children Summit. This is one of over twenty interviews that are part of the summit. If you would like a complete set of all of the recordings from the summit, or a set of recordings with transcripts, you can visit our website, purchase them and they will be available downloaded at the end of the summit.

You can get more information at www.attachu.org at A-T-T-A-C-H-U just the letter U dot org/events/summit.

At ATN I sit on the Board and we are committed to helping traumatized children and their families. If you would like to learn more about the support education advocacy we provide, please visit our main website at www.attachtrauma.org. Thank you for tuning in today and please join us again for other interviews.

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