



LIFE IS GOOD PLAYMAKERS ON THE GULF COAST

Study demonstrates powerful impact of play on children's recovery from trauma



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THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA ON CHILDREN



“Over two-thirds of American children and adolescents reported experiencing a traumatic event by the time they turned 16. The life expectancy of adults who experience six or more types of abuse or household dysfunction as children is reduced by nearly twenty years.”

Images of violence, war, and natural disasters regularly bombard us. Since news reporting typically focuses on breaking news, today's human tragedy is too often eclipsed by tomorrow's compelling calamity. Rarely do we consider the long-term consequences that traumatic events and circumstances have on the survivors, and especially on children – the most vulnerable of victims. The result is that the most serious health crisis for our nation's children remains largely invisible.

In a recent epidemiological study, over two-thirds of American children and adolescents reported experiencing a traumatic event by the time they turned 16.¹ Psychologists define trauma as an extremely threatening experience that compromises a person's ability to cope. Often trauma is divided into two categories. The first, acute trauma, refers to individual, large-scale events such as school shootings, natural disasters, and terrorist attacks, or to single incidents such as physical assault. The second, chronic trauma, refers to long-term, repeated situations such as ongoing long-term physical/sexual abuse, community violence or extreme poverty. This second category has devastating consequences. According to a large-scale epidemiological



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study conducted by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the life expectancy of adults who experienced six or more types of abuse or household dysfunction as children was reduced by nearly twenty years while those who suffered fewer types of trauma lost fewer years of life.²

The experience of trauma can also have a profound negative impact on a child's healthy development. Researchers have found that children who experience trauma often remain in a constant state of alarm, even when the danger is long gone.³ Basic assumptions that children make about the world, such as “I am safe” and “I am in control,” are often replaced with overwhelming feelings of fear and helplessness.⁴ Very young children are particularly vulnerable. The young, developing brain is highly sensitive to stress and will not fully develop emotional, social, and cognitive capacity if the child is continuously responding to threats during the first few years of life.⁵ Consumed by fear and powerlessness, traumatized children stop playing, connecting with others, and experiencing joy in the world around them. In the absence of intervention, the impact of early childhood trauma often has devastating long-term effects on their psychological and physical health.⁶





POTENTIAL FOR HEALING



Here's the good news: The sensitivity of young, developing brains also means that young children have an impressive ability to 'bounce back' when they receive support from adults who care about them.⁷ Interventions centered on **play** are especially promising in this regard. During childhood, our brain grows through play. Play is the medium through which children explore, learn, connect, and joyfully engage with the surrounding world. It is an essential activity through which children form healthy attachments, discover the world around them, and develop a foundation of competence, self-worth, and joy that can impact them for a lifetime.

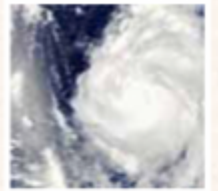
Recognizing the power of play to address this childhood health crisis, the Life is good Kids Foundation and its action arm, Life is good Playmakers, have made a long-term commitment to help children overcome life-threatening challenges. In order to reach as many children as possible, Life is good Playmakers (formerly known as Project Joy) work with adults who are on the front lines of early childhood care: preschool teachers and childcare providers. By providing training, resources and ongoing support for these teachers, Life is good Playmakers aim to help teachers heal their children by infusing their classrooms with joyful play, a sense of belonging, and opportunities for self-expression and empowerment.

The healing power of play is not limited to children. When communities experience trauma, the men and women who work with children on the front lines every day are just as vulnerable to distress as the children and families they serve. By giving these child care professionals the support and resources to find their own joy, increase their sense of community and connectedness, and empower them in the healing of children through play, their own social and emotional strength is shored up. And through a constructive cyclical process, the children are bolstered by their caregiver's renewed joyfulness.





THE GULF COAST



Along Mississippi's Gulf Coast, rates of extreme childhood poverty have been among the highest in the country for decades. These long-standing issues of poverty and hardship were severely compounded when Hurricane Katrina, one of the most devastating disasters in U.S. history, hit its coastal communities in August 2005. Due to the intensity of the storm and the painfully slow recovery, Katrina has caused both acute trauma and chronic complex trauma amongst children, their families, and the community at large.

The catastrophic damage caused by Katrina left towns underwater, neighborhoods destroyed, and schools closed. Families already struggling with poverty lost everything. In the five years since the storm, researchers have documented the impact that Hurricane Katrina had and continues to have on the mental health of children on the Gulf Coast. Up to 50% of young children whose homes had been destroyed met criteria for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder following the storm.⁸ Three years after Katrina, over 25% of children continued to report post-traumatic stress symptoms and/or depression.⁹ Typically, symptoms of depression and post-traumatic stress dissipate 9 to 14 months following the traumatic event.¹⁰ However, when there is continued disruption in the child's family or community, the symptoms often persist and can even increase.¹¹

50%

50% of young children whose homes were destroyed met criteria for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder following the storm.

9-14

Typically, symptoms of depression and post-traumatic stress dissipate 9 to 14 months following the traumatic event.

25%

Yet even three years after Katrina, 25% of children continued to report post-traumatic stress symptoms and/or depression.



In the years following Katrina, many parents have struggled to find work, pay bills, replace what was lost, and hold on to what little they have left. Preschool teachers in hard hit areas of the Gulf Coast often face similar concerns in their own homes. Unfortunately, children are not immune to their parents and their caregivers' feelings of anxiety, depression, and despair.

Despite the high rates of early childhood trauma in areas affected by the storm, there were few resources available to address the mental health needs of these young children. Following Katrina, staff at the Early Childhood Institute at Mississippi State University (MSU) realized that their own efforts needed to focus on the social and emotional healing of the Gulf Coast's young children. Searching for an intervention that could make a difference, Pam Mottley, a children's social and emotional development specialist, discovered Project Joy. She contacted its founder, Steve Gross, to learn more about the organization's capabilities. Their discussions led to a major intervention that has had a profound impact on all involved.



A JOYFUL SOLUTION

In the two years following Katrina, Project Joy trained hundreds of preschool teachers to use a play-based, group intervention named Powerplay. These teachers were then able to implement the program with thousands of children in the Mississippi Gulf Coast region. During a fifteen-week curriculum, teachers engaged their students each week. Powerplay sessions are divided into four parts:

THE WARM-UP: These activities allow children to become grounded in the play experience and build a sense of community.

THE STORY: Children are read and shown a picture book with stories that emphasize such themes as diversity, altruism, empowerment, belonging, and cooperation.

THE BIG GAME: Children engage in a cooperative game that allows them to actively take part in that story while exercising critical gross motor skills such as balancing, jumping and catching.

THE COOL DOWN: During these activities, children self-regulate through slow, deep breaths, celebrate accomplishments, and prepare for the transition to a different activity.

Each Powerplay session is designed to build self-esteem, promote a sense of belonging and connectedness, develop

self-regulation skills, and provide feelings of joy. Through structured group play, children have the opportunity to take effective, powerful action and in doing so, replace the feelings of fear and helplessness experienced in the wake of trauma with feelings of safety and competence.

RESEARCH STUDY AT A GLANCE

OF TEACHERS:



INTERVENTION
GROUP (10)



CONTROL
GROUP (10)

OF CHILDREN:



INTERVENTION
GROUP (55)



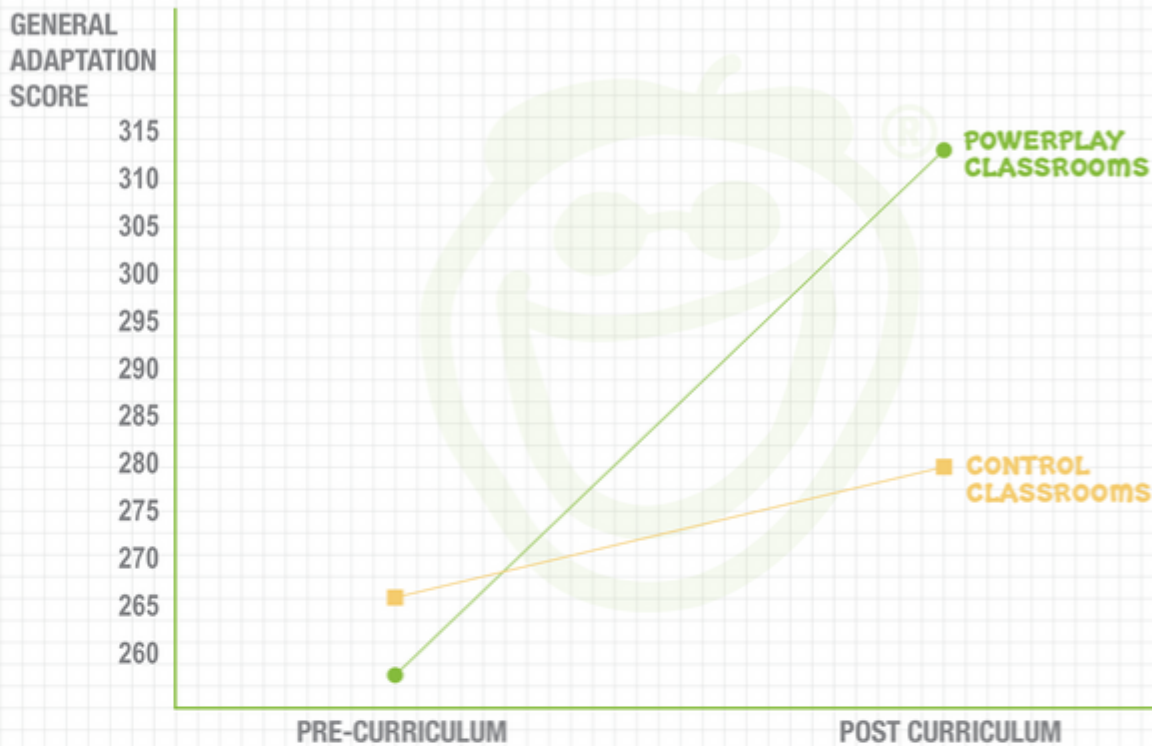
CONTROL
GROUP (56)

EACH SMILING FACE REPRESENTS
10 CHILDREN

AGE RANGE: 3½ TO 6 YRS

**THE MEASURE : SOCIAL COMPETENCE / BEHAVIOR
EVALUATION - PRESCHOOL EDITION (SCBE-80)**

CHANGES IN SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL WELLNESS



THE RESEARCH AND ITS FINDINGS

The Early Childhood Institute at MSU decided to collect data on the Powerplay program in order to assess its efficacy in helping to heal preschool children exposed to trauma. For the research study, ten teachers from ten different classrooms along the Gulf Coast participated in the curriculum and ten teachers from another ten classrooms served as a 'control group.' Control group teachers were placed on a waitlist and participated in the trainings after the study had ended. Participating teachers attended a two-day training, received play kit equipment for the classroom (e.g., a parachute, balls, discs, scarves), led their six-student groups through the fifteen-week curriculum, and received regular support from the Early Childhood Institute. To measure the impact of the curriculum on the children's social-emotional well-being, all the teachers in

the study completed assessments of the children's social and emotional health before the training and approximately one week after the curriculum was finished.

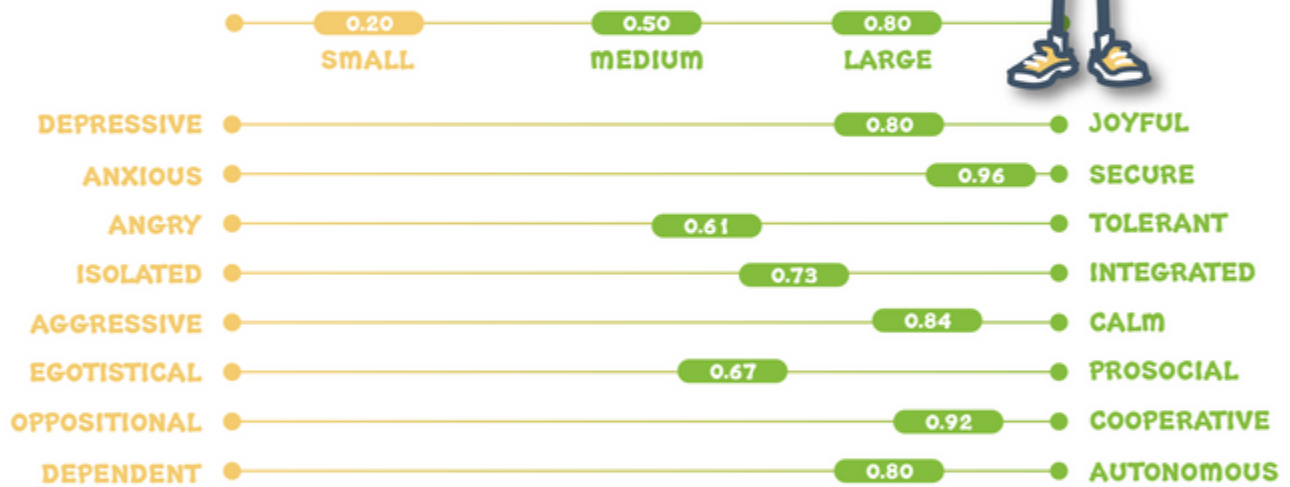
Before the training began, children in the Powerplay classrooms demonstrated slightly lower levels of 'general adaptation' (social-emotional health) than the children in the control classrooms. Over the fifteen week period, children in the control classroom improved slightly. In contrast, children participating in Powerplay improved significantly. In fact, participating children not only showed significantly greater improvement than the control classrooms, they ended the fifteen week period with better social-emotional well-being overall.

THE RESEARCH AND ITS FINDINGS CONT.

Researchers often use effect sizes to determine whether a difference between two groups is 'statistically significant.' As a standard rule of thumb, effect sizes of 0.20 are considered small, 0.50 are considered medium, and 0.80 and above are considered large.¹² All of the social-emotional scales showed the same pattern: both groups improved, but the children in the Powerplay classrooms improved significantly more than the control classrooms

with effect sizes ranging from 0.61 (medium) to 0.98 (large). Children participating in Powerplay became significantly less depressive, anxious, angry, isolated, aggressive, and oppositional. And they became significantly more joyful, pro-social, and independent. Below are the effect sizes for each scale:

EFFECT SIZES FOR EACH SCALE





IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

These preliminary findings tell us that the approach used by Life is good Playmakers can provide teachers with powerful tools for healing in the preschool classroom. Following trauma, children need a safe space in which they can rediscover their own natural ability to successfully explore, connect with those around them, and find joy. Through joyful play, children experience greater connection with their teachers and their peers, they develop a sense of confidence and mastery, and they learn to express their feelings in a healthy, productive way. Life is good Playmakers support teachers by providing them with the tools to restore their own playfulness and bring that playfulness to the classroom. Exuding their own joy, teachers are then able to nurture each child's innate resilience and undo the destructive impact of trauma. Using play, teachers can put

children whose development has been sidelined by trauma back on track.

Bolstered by these promising findings, the Life is good Kids Foundation is committed to greater levels of funding and expansion of its action arm, Life is good Playmakers. In addition, the organization will pursue further research to understand the impact that such interventions have on the teachers and children they serve. Through practice and research, the Life is good Kids Foundation is optimistic that its play-based approach and tools can be more widely shared and used by child care professionals, leading to progress on the most significant health crisis facing America's children.



LIFE CAN HURT. PLAY CAN HEAL.

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