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RESILIENCY ZONES

A GUIDE FOR INFANT AND
EARLY CARE SETTINGS



ResilientGEORGIA

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Loop It Up Savannah

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RESILIENT GEORGIA

Aligning public and private efforts and resources across the state that support resiliency for all persons aged 0-26 and their families.



Who is this guide for?

This guide was created for Early Care centers across the state of Georgia serving children ages 0-5 years old. Our objective with this guide is to improve Infant and Early Care Mental Health (IECMH) by providing the framework to create spaces called Resiliency Zones. In 2021, we piloted this effort with 10 Infant and Early Care centers. We continue to work with various center coordinators, facilitators, principals, faith-based leaders, teachers, counselors, and behavior specialists to customize this guide. We encourage Infant and Early Care centers across the state of Georgia to use this guide to help them develop Resiliency Zones in their settings.

Please share any questions, feedback, and resources to info@resilientga.org.

What is Infant and Early Care Mental Health (IECMH)?

“Infant and early care mental health, also known as social and emotional health, is the developing capacity of the child from birth to 5 years of age to form close and secure adult and peer relationships; experience, manage, and express a full range of emotions; and explore the environment and learn—all in the context of family, community, and culture.”¹



Why is IECMH Important?

Young children rely on behaviors and nonverbal communication to express themselves, especially those who are not yet talking or are still developing verbal communication. Children as young as infants can express mental health concerns, including persistent and severe symptoms typically diagnosed as a social-emotional disorder.

Several studies highlight the importance of addressing social-emotional wellbeing early in life. From this research, it is also known that young children who have experienced a traumatic event, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), or toxic stress have a greater risk of poor social-emotional development. ACEs studies have led to a deeper understanding of the deep-rooted impacts of untreated trauma symptoms and mental health concerns in children. Trauma symptoms, if not treated, can increase the likelihood of developing chronic conditions, such as mental health and substance use disorders, and may lead to a shorter lifespan. Furthermore, untreated mental health concerns can have damaging effects on one's ability to lead a successful and productive life. In addition to individual consequences, delaying intervention for young children has serious costs on society.

More than 900,000 children ages 0-6 live in Georgia, and approximately 126,000 children may need mental health services. Infant and early childhood mental health (IECMH) can have long-term impacts on children's overall development. Early intervention is crucial to prevent long-lasting and more costly treatments. In response to IECMH needs in the state, Georgia has highlighted the systems that support the social-emotional wellbeing of young children.

Given the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, it has become more evident that there is a need to prioritize the social, emotional, and mental well-being of youth and young children.

"This past year has been unlike any we have experienced as a society. The social isolation, fear, and sickness that has run rampant in our state and country has added another element in the equation. These extreme stressors can impact young people for a lifetime, which is why it is so important to arm educators with all the tools we possibly can." - Dr. Emily Anne Vall, Executive Director, Resilient Georgia

Evidence Based for Mindfulness and IECMH Interventions³

Children who learn with the support of a trusting adult how to calm down when they are upset develop greater strength in the brain's circuits for managing distress. Mindfulness and yoga are activities that can help individuals manage their stress. Mindfulness has been shown to improve stress, attention, and even relationships. "The American Psychological Association shares research on a range of benefits of mindfulness, including stress reduction, boosts to working memory, focus, less emotional reactivity, more cognitive flexibility, and relation satisfaction."³ Research has also shown that adults and youth that practice mindfulness and yoga experience benefits such as improved social-emotional skills, cognitive outcomes, and well-being.

"The Research-based, Developmentally Informed (REDI) intervention aimed to promote early social-emotional and language skills in preschools and moderated the impact of early ACEs on adolescent adjustment. It also promoted youth resilience, significantly buffering children from the negative impact of early ACEs on their levels of social-emotional distress and school bonding."⁴



OVERVIEW OF RESILIENCY ZONES



Overview of Resiliency Zones ⁵

Resiliency Zones create a safe space for both students and staff. They promote self-regulation and mindfulness and include age-appropriate calming resources. These spaces help educators teach students the skills they need to manage their emotions in safe ways, solve problems and regain control of their emotions. Designed to support students experiencing varying degrees of trauma, it uses different techniques to build self-esteem and trust between students and school staff and gives them skills that promote self-understanding and self-regulation. Our objective is to give students the confidence to manage their circumstances both in and outside of the centers, and with increased agency, see growth in self-esteem, productive engagement and achievement later in life.

How to Use This Guide ⁵

This guide provides a “how-to” on ways to set up a Resiliency Zone in an Early Care center in addition to a collection of activities and resources that will help children develop skills that they can use when faced with challenging situations. The curriculum is designed to address various behavioral issues, help regulate them in a supportive environment, and provide strategies to work with students to develop ways to find solutions to those issues.

This guide is designed to be:

1. Easy to implement
2. Cost Effective
3. Accessible
4. Portable

You are encouraged to personalize this manual so that it works for you and your program, school, and students. This manual offers many suggestions, although feel free to bring your own creativity and inspiration into the work you are doing in the Resiliency Zones! ⁶

At the end of the guide, you will find additional resources to help enhance your knowledge and practice.



RESILIENCY ZONE SET UP



Resiliency Zone Set Up ⁷

Your Resiliency Zone should consist of a comfortable place to sit or lay down, and may include calming activities for each child to engage in. Below are a few tips to keep in mind when setting up your spaces:

- Have the students help with the planning. Listen to their Resiliency Zone ideas. This is a great way to make your students feel included in the process and ensures the space works for their individual needs.
- Teach the students how to use everything you've included. Don't set expectations based on assumptions; instead, set each child up for success. Include simple items and activities that everyone can feel confident about using when in the space.
- Be consistent. Knowing when it's time to use the Resiliency Zone will take some getting used to, but with consistency and firm but gentle guidance your students will eventually catch on and begin to use it properly.
- Work together to create a set of rules for the space. Giving your students' the opportunity to take part in setting the rules will help to provide structure and expectations for the space while encouraging some creativity!

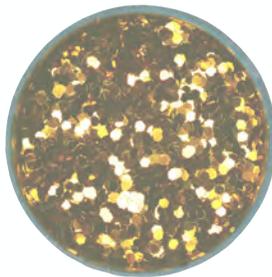
It is important to note that students should not be sent to the Resiliency Zone as a consequence or due to poor decision making but can go to this area whenever they need calm and stillness to regain their inner balance.³ “The Resiliency Zone can also be used when they feel overwhelmed, stressed, angry, or otherwise out of control emotionally—times when being alone would be helpful.”³ If possible, students should be accompanied by a trusting adult as a “time in” to provide support for co-regulation. Young children are more likely to learn self-regulation skills in a trusting relationship with an adult who can help them with their big feelings.

“To ensure that these spaces are trauma-sensitive we invite you to work with the students to practice making healthy and safe choices for themselves. Offering choice in activities, while not offering too many choices to not overwhelm them, is essential. Always encouraging participation, but not forcing a child into something. The goal is to encourage and teach choice. You must also ensure that you have appropriate boundaries established so that each child is aware of the rules and expectation of utilizing the space.” ⁶

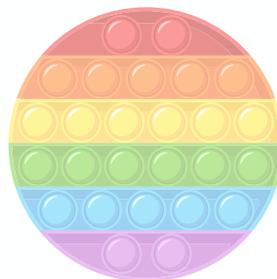


Mindfulness Activities ⁶

Artwork - A short and simple art activity can be great to practice mindfulness together while coloring. Students can either take the art home or you can put it up in the space.



Fidget Toys - Fidget toys are designed to help students with focus and attention. There are different kinds of fidget toys made for different needs and ages such as cubes, spinners and jewelry. Fidget toys provide a place for kids to direct their energy and keep their hands busy while still participating in group activities.



Simple Mindful Art Project Ideas

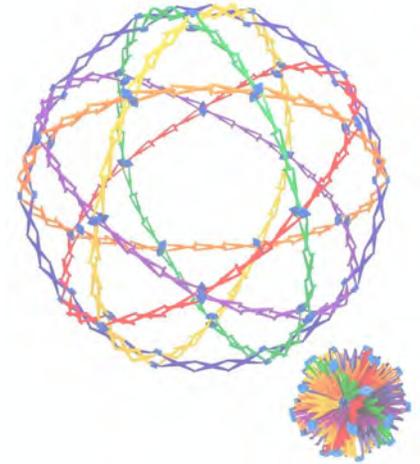
See Loop It Up Early Learners Workbook for more ideas and details!

- Coffee Filter Butterflies
- Pinwheels
- Straw Painting
- Plate Faces
- Flowers
- Bee
- Emotion Masks
- Glitter Jars
- Mandala Coloring
- Mandala building
- Worry Stone Painting



Mindfulness Activities ⁶

Hoberman Sphere - The Hoberman sphere is a fun tool to practice breathing! You can share with the students that the Hoberman sphere is a representation of what our lungs are doing while we take breaths in and out. If you don't have access to this item, the activity can also be performed using your hands.



When you open and close the ball or your hands ask students to breathe along with the movement. Make sure you breathing at a pace suited to the age and lung capacity of the group you're teaching. Keep in mind that children breathe faster because their lungs are smaller.

The average resting respiratory rates by age are: birth to 6 weeks: 30–40 breaths per minute; 6 months: 25–40 breaths per minute; 3 years: 20–30 breaths per minute; 6 years: 18–25 breaths per minute.

Invite a child to sit with you and take a few deep breaths. Then open and close the Hoberman sphere to follow the breath of the student, instead of the child following the sphere. When you follow the breath for a few cycles, it can start to change on its own. Try this exercise for a minute with different students and explain that people have different breathing rates and how awareness can change the breath.

Flower / Candle Breath - Encourage your students to choose a standing or sitting position such as sitting in a chair or sitting cross-legged. Invite them to close their eyes if that is comfortable and begin to notice the sound of their breath. Then ask them to imagine they are holding a flower and to think of the color and smell of that flower. Then taking in a deep breath, ask them to pretend to smell that flower. Then exhale and pretend to blow the flower petals OR they can blow out a candle.



Repeat the cycle of a strong inhale and gentle exhale for a couple of minutes, if possible. You can also invite them to pretend to smell a different flower each time they inhale or imagine themselves sitting in a meadow of fresh flowers. This flower breath is an easy way to help students become aware of their breath. You could also pretend to smell hot chocolate then blow the hot chocolate to cool it down. During fall, you could pretend to smell the fall air (inhale) and then blow leaves (exhale).

Mindfulness Activities ⁶

Tense and Release Muscle Relaxation - This practice is a great way to get out some energy and release any tension that students may feel in their body. The students can choose to lay down or to be seated for this practice. As you guide them, start at the toes and work each section of the body. Encourage your students to utilize this practice when they need to calm down, to release some energy or big emotions throughout their day.

Starting at the toes invite them to squeeze all the muscles in their toes and feet. Hold this for 3 counts, count out loud so they know when to release. You can then move to the leg muscles, hold for 3 seconds and release. You can guide them through their upper legs, stomachs, chest and arms, make hands into fists, and finally end with their head and face. This can be fun to encourage them to make silly faces while they hold the muscles!



Singing Bowl - The purpose of the singing bowl is to create a listening experience. This is a mindfulness practice that focuses on a sound from beginning to end to help students practice quieting their mind and focus on one thing.

Letting them know if their thoughts and mind wander - it's okay! It happens to all of us. The expectation is not to have zero thoughts, but to notice when they get distracted and practice bringing themselves back to the present moment. This is about learning how to notice and pay attention and not getting carried away with our thoughts.

It is good to be in the habit of reminding the students each time what the expectations for the singing bowl time are. You can invite them to each get a turn and set a number of times each student can ring the singing bowl at the very beginning.

Materials

Each Resiliency Zone will receive a basic “toolbox” with items that can help enhance your time with students. These are some potential items that your toolbox may include:



- Coloring Books
- Sand or Bubble Timer
- Stress Ball
- Picture Books
- Bean Bag Chairs
- Breathing Buddies - Beanie Babies, stuffed animals etc.
- Weighted Items (weighted animal, pillow, etc.)
- Markers, Crayons, Paint, Construction Paper, and Contact Paper
- Clay
- Hoberman Sphere
- Singing Bowl
- Fidget Toys

Physical Space vs Mindset

A Resiliency Zone is not confined to a physical space. Resiliency Zones can be cultivated as a mindset where students are taught skills that help them manage their emotions or stressful environments. These skills can be used in any environment, both indoors and outdoors, and the goal is for students to learn that they can use these skills whenever they feel stressed, upset, or overwhelmed. These skills might include taking deep breaths, reciting positive affirmations, practicing gratitude, coloring, drawing or simple types of play.

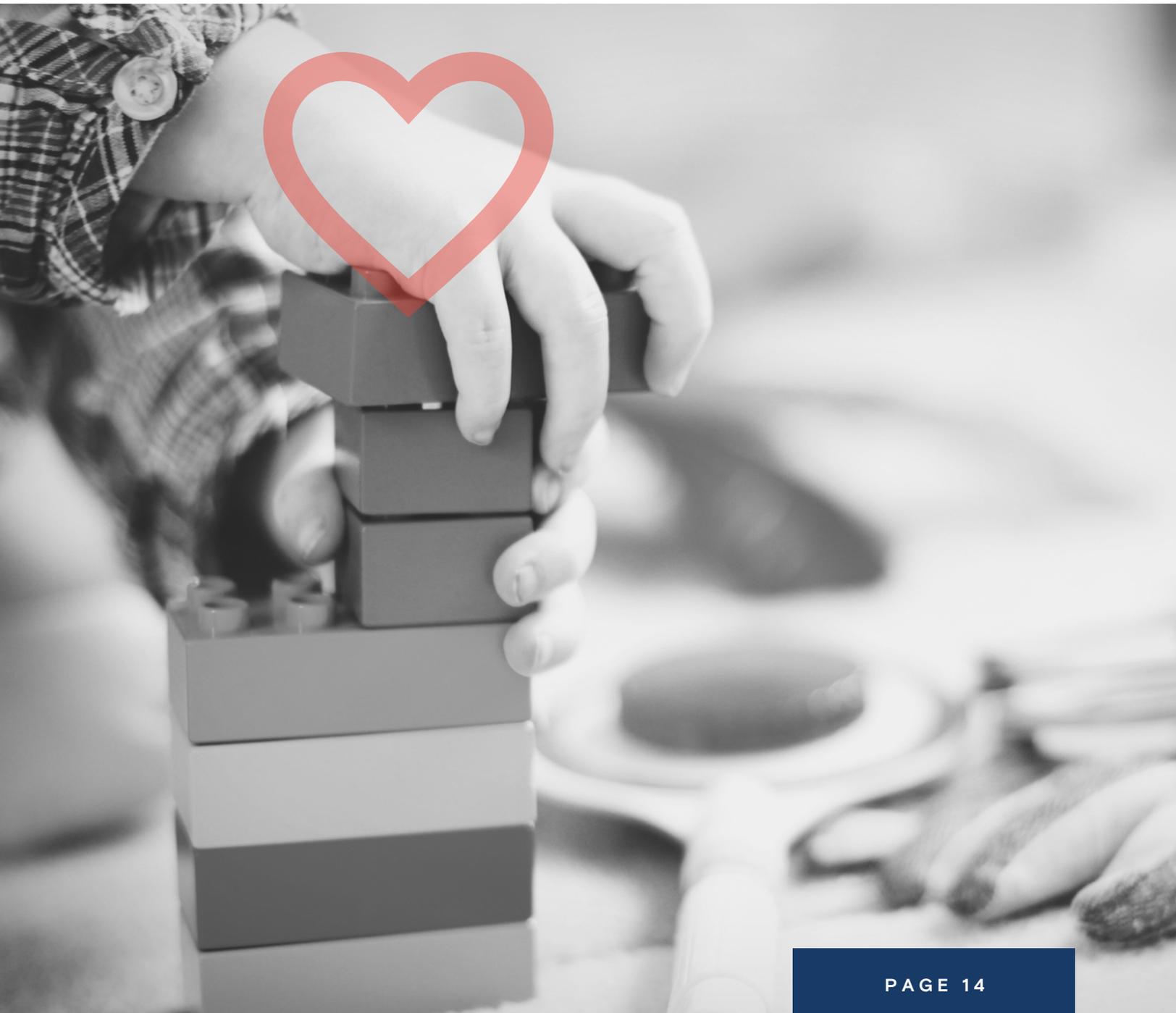
Depending on the type of physical space that you have in your center or school, you might want to consider which items could be beneficial to have in each classroom for students and teachers to use. A great way to bring Mindfulness and Resiliency into specific classrooms is to include a Mindfulness Station in your classroom’s Centers. This will allow you to build a variety of Mindfulness and Resilience based activities into an existing structure in your classroom. (The Loop it Up Mindfulness for Early Learners program includes suggestions for rotating activities for Centers.)

Alternatively, you may consider setting up a designated Resiliency Zone that students from several classrooms can visit. If your center has the capacity, you can also incorporate both ideas! Work with your centers leadership and staff to determine what is optimal for your space and the population you serve. Then get creative and start setting up your Resiliency Zone!

Results

The outcomes from a successful program include:

- “The development of skills that underlie executive function including self-control, emotional responsibility, and reflection.” ⁶
- “A reduction in the numbers of class dismissals and school suspensions due to disruptive behavior.” ⁶
- “An increase in the levels of overall social/emotional skill, responsibility over academic achievement, and leadership ability.” ⁶



Additional Resources

This is an initial list of relevant and helpful resources. Please share any questions, feedback, and resources to info@resilientga.org.

1. **Loop It Up Savannah, The Mindfulness Zone**

The Mindfulness Zone is a program that works to give children agency in addressing emotionally challenging circumstances that arise in school among peers, at home with family members, and among community members. The program presents strategies for problem solving using mindfulness practice, yoga, and expressive arts, and works with children to develop their personal toolkits of problem-solving skills. The goals of this program align with developing the five core competencies defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning which include: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. This program is currently offered to both elementary students and early learners.

Mindfulness Videos

- Unit 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tOZVyi0ELGM>
- Unit 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZH0AzyZ1MFw>
- Unit 3: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NZLz0tNwgPU>

2. **Action for Healthy Kids: Calm Down Corner**

3. **How a Calming Corner Helps Kids Manage Emotions in Classrooms, Children's Healthcare of Atlanta Strong4Life**

4. Reclaiming Youth International Journal, Volume 21, Number 2, Summer 2012, Pages 27-33, **Cultivating the Social, Emotional, and Inner Lives of Children and Teachers**

5. **Teachers Pay Teachers**: Mindfulness activities created by educators. Some are free and some can be purchased for a small cost.

6. **Wholehearted School Counseling**

- <https://www.facebook.com/WholeHeartedSchoolCounseling1/>
- <https://www.instagram.com/wholeheartedschoolcounseling/?hl=en>
- https://www.pinterest.com/wholeheartedschoolcounseling/_created/

7. **Design a Healing Garden**

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2. **Prioritizing the Mental Health of Infants and Toddlers in Georgia: Why It's Important and What Comes Next**, Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health (IECMH) Brief, 2021. Center of Excellence for Children's Behavioral Health, Georgia Health Policy Center, Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, Georgia State University and Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning.
3. Reclaiming Youth International Journal, Volume 21, Number 2, Summer 2012, Pages 27-33, **Cultivating the Social, Emotional, and Inner Lives of Children and Teachers**
4. Sanders, M. T., Welsh, J. A., Bierman, K. L., & Heinrichs, B. S. (2020). Promoting resilience: A preschool intervention enhances the adolescent adjustment of children exposed to early adversity. *School Psychology*, 35(5), 285–298. [10.1037/spq0000406](https://doi.org/10.1037/spq0000406)
5. **Loop It Up Savannah Mindfulness Zone Program**
6. **Loop It Up Savannah Mindfulness Zone Guide for Educators**
7. Perry, C. (2020, May 26). How to create the perfect calm-down corner at home. Parents. Retrieved from <https://www.parents.com/toddlers-preschoolers/discipline/how-to-create-a-calm-down-corner-at-home/>



APPENDIX

A. Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) Preschool Development Renewal Grant

In January 2020, Governor Brian Kemp announced that Georgia had been awarded a three-year, \$11.2 million Preschool Development Renewal Grant (PDG) by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Department of Education. This funding built on an initial \$2.9 million PDG Planning Grant the state received in January 2019.

Georgia is one of 26 states to be awarded renewal funds that will allow the state to expand efforts to help families access high quality early childhood services statewide. The original 2019 planning grant required grantees to conduct a needs assessment of the state's early childhood system and develop a strategic plan to strengthen and align programs and services. The renewal funds will allow Georgia to continue designing and implementing activities that align with the strategic plan.

As the lead agency for the grant, DECAL will focus on the unique needs of children and their families from vulnerable and underserved populations, such as those living in poverty, experiencing homelessness, living in foster care, living in rural areas, and living with disabilities. Ultimately, however, the activities funded by the grant will benefit all children and families in Georgia.

DECAL will use renewal grant funds to:

- Strengthen families' voices and engage families in their children's care and education
- Help families understand child development and connect to early intervention services
- Connect families to community services through strengthening partnerships and transitions
- Facilitate career pathways for early care and education professionals and build early childhood workforce capacity
- Increase information about Quality Rated statewide especially among underserved populations
- Make integrated data accessible and use data to ensure accountability and quality

The Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning awarded the 2020 Preschool Developmental Renewal Grant to Resilient Georgia.

APPENDIX

B. Resilient Georgia

Resilient Georgia's mission is to align public and private efforts and resources across the state that support resiliency for all persons aged 0-26 and their families. We are working with diverse partners to build a trauma-informed Georgia by promoting the impact of ACEs on healthy child brain development, mental health and well-being for all infants, children, adolescents (birth to 25 years) and their families through strategies informed by research, policy and practice. Resilient Georgia acts as the convening organization to create and implement, through collaborative partnerships, Georgia's first birth through 26 integrated mental health system.

Resilient Georgia's leadership is devoted to Infant and Early Care best practices, Early Brain Development, ACEs Prevention and Trauma Informed Care. Many of our Executive Board Members are state and national leaders in this space. Resilient Georgia is dedicated to creating a trauma informed state that cares for our 0-5 population in a caring, innovative and progressive way. Resilient Georgia believes that 1- Access to behavioral and mental health care is paramount to our success and that all children in Georgia regardless of their zip code have access, 2- that all children should have access to high quality child care and developmentally appropriate instruction, 3- that all children and their families should have the resources at their fingertips that enable them to build and bolster their understanding of healthy child development and two generation, family centric, strategies and programs. Lastly, RG is working hard to celebrate and share the important work that partners from across the state are doing to impact this population and build IECMH awareness statewide.

Resilient Georgia staff and partners are working with members of Resilient Georgia's Regional coalitions and DECAL staff to identify Early Care centers that would benefit from Resiliency Zones in their spaces.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to the following individuals for their subject matter expertise and contribution in developing, reviewing, and editing this guide:

Molly Liberman, Executive Director, Loop It up Savannah

Molly Lieberman is the Founder and Executive Director of Loop It Up Savannah, a community arts and enrichment non-profit which provides art, STEAM, yoga and mindfulness, gardening, cooking and other enrichment workshops and experiences to children and families throughout Chatham County Georgia.



Loop It Up programs give young people opportunities to explore and express who they are, both as individuals and members of a community as well as fostering strong relationships, and building sustainable and interconnected communities where everyday needs are met with creativity and confidence. Loop It Up programs give students opportunities to participate in a variety of creative and hands-on activities, which engage their academic knowledge, while accelerating learning through standards based arts integration curriculum that nurtures and supports the whole child.

Through partnerships with the Savannah Chatham County Public School System, the City of Savannah, Chatham County and many local non-profits, Loop It Up Savannah provides arts programming at over 30 locations and to over 10,000 students each year.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Kathy Brown-Bragg, MSW, LCSW, MAC, CHRIS 180 Project Director, New Generation- Infant Early Childhood Mental Health Project

Kathy Brown-Bragg is a Licensed Clinical Social Work who received her Master of Social Work degree from Rutgers's University in New Jersey. She completed postgraduate work in Marriage and Family Therapy at the Multicultural Family Institute in New Jersey and a Georgetown University Fellow in the School-Justice Partnerships and Diversion Pathways Program.



New Generation- IECMH was developed to build capacity to identify, refer and serve infants and children with social emotional needs due to exposure to violence, family substance use, out of home placement, and other experiences of trauma. All services are provided within a wraparound, trauma-informed framework to support both children and caregivers.

Trauma training and technical assistance are available to early childhood providers and clinicians throughout the Atlanta areas to help identify and refer children and families which eliminate barriers to appropriate systems of care for the delivery of early intervention services.

Kathy served as the Co-Chair of the Exploratory Board for the establishment of Georgia Association of Infant Mental Health, housed in Georgia State University-Mark Chaffin Center for Healthy Development.

Kathy has received extensive training. She is a nationally recognized Child Parent Psychotherapy therapist, Circle of Security Facilitator, Advance Perinatal Mental Health Psychotherapy trainer, IECMH consultant, reflective supervisor and Certified Grief Counselor. Kathy has worked in federally funded community health centers, community mental health centers, hospitals, and university settings for over twenty years with young children, adolescents, and adults.

Kathy is passionate about promoting the social-emotional wellness of infants and young children who are most vulnerable in our communities. She believes promotion, prevention and intervention should be delivered in a respectful, supportive manner grounded within a holistic, culturally competent, strength-based, equitable and inclusive framework.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Chidinma Ohanele, Resilient Georgia Program Coordinator

Chidinma Ohanele is a second-year Master of Public Health student in the Rollins School of Public Health, Emory University concentrating her studies in Behavioral, Social, and Health Education Sciences. She received her Bachelor of Science in Psychology from University of California, Davis in 2018.



Prior to pursuing her graduate degree, she was a Registered Behavioral Therapist and worked with children 0-5 who have Autism Spectrum Disorder. Over the past year she has served as a State Scan Evaluation Consultant for Resilient Georgia and assisted the organization in identifying ACEs related best practices across agencies, to serve as a guidepost to support Georgia's System-of-Care implementation and coordination. Recently, she has assumed the role of a Program Coordinator to facilitate the coordination and implementation of the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL) Preschool Development Renewal Grant.

Chidinma is passionate about expanding knowledge and access to child behavioral health and mental health. In addition she also has interests in health equity, racial justice, community advocacy & engagement, and health communications.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. Trasie Topple, PhD, LCSW

Trasie A. Topple, PhD, LCSW is the founder of Infant and Early Childhood Mental Health Resource of Georgia, where she provides consultation and workforce development for several statewide infant and early childhood programs. Dr. Topple also works with local agencies serving young children, including Early Head Start and Head Start classrooms. She is experienced in evidence-based treatments for young children and continues to practice as a Circle of Security® Parenting Facilitator Trainer and Classroom Coach for parents, teachers, and professionals around the United States.



She completed the IECMH fellowship at the University of Massachusetts-Boston and has worked as a part-time instructor in the School of School Work at the University of Georgia. She serves as the co-president of the Advisory Council of the newly formed Georgia Association for Infant Mental Health (GA-AIMH).

In addition, Dr. Topple has given numerous lectures and presentations, regionally and nationally, concerning the impact of early caregiving environments for infants and toddlers, protective factors of caregiving relationships, and professional development for early childhood educators.

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The contents of the Resiliency Zone Guide are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Office of Child Care, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.



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Questions or feedback?
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