How Trauma Informed Schools Can Help Children’s Trauma and Family Recovery

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TRAUMA INFORMED SCHOOLS: Impact of Invisible Wounds on Children

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Events of the Last 20 Years That Changed the Culture of Education

• 1990-2009 School Shootings – 500
• 1995 - Oklahoma City
• 2001 - 9/11 Terrorist Attacks NYC/DC
• 2005 – Hurricanes Katrina and Rita
• 2007 – Virginia Tech
• 2011 – Gabby Giffords – Tucson, AZ.
• 2012 – Sandy Hook, Newton CT
• 2013 – Student Suicide at School, MI

What are the consequences of trauma?

…One night a year ago, I saw men shooting at each other, people running to hide. I was scared and I thought I was going to die.

After this happened, I started to have nightmares. I felt scared all the time. I couldn’t concentrate in class like before. I had thoughts that something bad could happen to me. I started to get in a lot of fights at school and with my brothers…

– Martin, 6th grader
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Why a program for traumatized students?

While walking we saw people crying because they had no food and water. We saw bodies in the street. They had an old man dead in a chair. I was so scared I thought I was going to die. We were walking on the bridge, and the army men started to shoot in the air, and I just started to cry. I was so scared. It started to rain and everyone started to cry, saying, “I hope another hurricane don’t pass by.”

Keoka, 10th grade

What About THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP?

The negative effects of trauma exposure may explain one aspect of the bleak reality that African American and Latino students continue to trail far behind their Caucasian peers in schools, such as higher drop out rates from high school after generations of education “reform”.

The Importance of Creating Trauma Informed Schools

- Classroom performance declines due to...
  - Inability to concentrate
  - Flashbacks and preoccupation with the trauma
  - Avoidance of school and other places
- Other behavioral and emotional problems develop that can impede learning and interpersonal relations
  - Substance abuse
  - Aggression
  - Depression

Effects of Violence and Trauma Take a Measurable Toll

- Decreased IQ and reading ability (Delaney-Black et al., 2003)
- More suspensions and expulsions (LAUSD survey, 2006)
- Decreased rates of high school graduation (Draper, 1997)
- Lower grade point average (Hurt et al., 2001)
- More days absent from school (Hurt et al., 2001)
“Interpersonal violence is a public health emergency... and one of the most significant public health issues facing America”

C. Everett Koop, JAMA, 1992

A Startling Number of Students Are Exposed to Violence

- 6% No violence
- 27% No violence
- 48% Witness
- 23% Direct assault & witness
- 2% Direct assault
- 54% Violence not involving a weapon
- 40% Gun or knife violence

National Survey of Adolescents, 1995
The LA Unified School District 6th-Grade Students, 2004

Important to find ways to reach youth outside of the mental health sector

- 80% of children with emotional problems don’t get needed treatment
- Disparities in access are real
- Schools and other programs can be ideal settings for detecting trauma in children and intervening – Barriers to accessing mental health care are significantly removed

Working with schools, we developed CBITS

- A school-based intervention to help kids cope with the effects of trauma
- Delivered by licensed mental health professionals
- Proven effective in research trials

Support for Students Exposed to Trauma (SSET) – Modified for Use by Teachers

- A modified version of CBITS for use by teachers and others
- Graduate Interns and School Counselors can deliver this intervention
- Pilot tests indicate that SSET is promising

Core Concepts in Trauma Informed Schools – The Role of School Social Workers

- Early Detection and Intervention
- Exposure to violence and trauma are detected early with early intervention
- Understanding Effects on Student Learning
- Students learn skills to cope more effectively with the distress that interferes with learning
- Informed Teachers and Parents
- Teachers and parents learn how they can support fearful and anxious students in the classroom and at home
**Trauma Informed Schools – Sample Strategies for School Social Workers**

- **School Wide Ecological Strategies:** Positive, Safe School Climate
- **Psychosocial Education:** SSET (Support to Students Exposed to Trauma)
- **Crisis Counseling:** Psychological First Aid: Listen Protect Connect
- **Early Intervention:** CBITS (Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools)
- **Intensive Intervention:** TF-CBT (Trauma Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy)
- **RTI*:** Guiding principals and teachers

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**Schools are Human Systems**

Is it an Open or Closed “Family System”? How did it deal with human problems and conflicts? What is the message of leadership? Letters to parents Communication with students How will it be Affected by Trauma? Is it ready to engage in response and recovery?

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**The Importance of Creating Trauma Informed Schools**

- Uninformed Adults may not recognize distress in children
- Uninformed Adults may deny children’s reactions
- Well Intentioned Adults may become preoccupied with their own issues and unintentionally neglect the needs of traumatized children

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**What Is Child Traumatic Stress?**

- Child traumatic stress refers to the physical and emotional responses of a child to events that threaten the life or physical integrity of the child or of someone critically important to the child (such as a parent or sibling).
- Traumatic events overwhelm a child’s capacity to cope and elicit feelings of terror, powerlessness, and out-of-control physiological arousal.

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**Types of Traumatic Stress**

- **Acute** trauma - a single traumatic event
- **Chronic** trauma - Multiple and varied events-domestic violence, a serious car accident, a victim of community violence
- **Complex** trauma - Multiple interpersonal traumatic events from a very young age.

Profound effects on nearly every aspect of a child’s development and functioning.

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**Trauma and the Developing Brain**

Traumatized children and adolescents display changes in the levels of stress hormones similar to those seen in combat veterans.
The Influence of Developmental Stages

- Traumatized children expend a great deal of energy responding to, coping with, and coming to terms with the event(s).
- The longer traumatic stress goes untreated, the farther children tend to stray from appropriate developmental pathways.

When Working with Abused/Neglected Children

- Exposure to trauma is the rule, not the exception, among children in the child welfare system.
- The signs and symptoms of child traumatic stress vary in different age groups.
- Children's “bad” behavior is sometimes an adaptation to trauma.

Effects of Trauma Exposure on Children

- **Attachment.** Social isolation/difficulty relating to and empathizing with others.
- **Biology.** Problems with movement and sensation, hypersensitivity to physical contact, insensitivity to pain, unexplained physical symptoms and increased medical problems.
- **Mood regulation.** Difficulty regulating emotions/ Difficulty knowing and describing their feelings and internal states.
- **Dissociation.** Detachment or depersonalization, as if they are “observing” reality is unreal.
- **Behavioral control.** Poor impulse control, self-destructive behavior, aggression.
- **Cognition.** Problems focusing on and completing tasks, or planning for and anticipating future events/ Learning problems with language development.
- **Self-concept.** Disturbed body image, low self-esteem, shame, and guilt.

School Mental Health Services and RTI

- **Academic Systems**
  - Intensive, Individual Interventions
  - Assessment-based
  - High intensity, durable procedures
- **Mental Health Services**
  - Targeted Group Interventions
  - High efficiency
- **Behavioral Systems**
  - Universal Interventions
  - Prevention, proactive

Change in Priorities for Teaching

- Teaching strategies which provide both stability in the external environment and a reduction of internal arousal in order for the child to feel "safe”
- Willingness to Assess Changes in the Child’s Behavior and to help the child understand those changes
Understanding The Nature and Context of Trauma and Traumatic Experience Outside of School

- Trauma often occurs within a context outside of school that includes children’s life experiences, family history, and current circumstances (#1).
- Brain development and brain function underlies children’s reactions to traumatic experiences (#2).
- Culture and social norms and values are closely interwoven with traumatic experiences, response, and recovery (#3).

**12 Core Competencies**

Understanding the Effects of Trauma on Children in School

- Children can exhibit a wide range of reactions to trauma and loss (#4).
- Danger and safety are the core concerns in the lives of traumatized children even in mostly safe places like school (#5).
- Traumatic events outside school can generate distressing reminders in the hallway, in the classroom or anywhere on school grounds that interfere with a student’s ability to regulate their emotions and to learn (#6).

**12 Core Competencies**

Understanding the Effects of Trauma on Children in School

- Protective factors, such as positive relationships with teachers and peers in schools can reduce the adverse impact of trauma (#7).
- Trauma plays an major role among at risk and special populations: Children in the Child Welfare and Juvenile Justice Systems, in Special Education, LGBTQ Children, Children in Areas of Poverty, Gang Violence and Crime, Children with MH Challenges, etc. (#8).

**12 Core Competencies**

Understanding the Implications of Child Trauma for Teachers, Administrators and School Staffs

- Trauma generated behaviors are complex but can be understood and addressed by educators (#9).
- A positive teacher student relationship may take an investment of more time with a traumatized child. (#10).
- Student Teacher Trust must be established before the process of Learning can truly begin (#11).
- Working with trauma-exposed children can evoke distress in providers that makes it more difficult for them to teach and manage the classroom (#12).

**12 Core Competencies**

Compassion Fatigue

"There is a cost to caring. We professionals who are paid to listen to the stories of fear, pain, and suffering of others may feel, ourselves, similar fear, pain and suffering because we care."

"Compassion fatigue is the emotional residue of exposure to working with the suffering, particularly those suffering from the consequences of traumatic events."

Charles R. Figley, Ph.D.
Social Workers Know

RISK FACTORS

ARE NOT PREDICTIVE FACTORS

BECAUSE OF PROTECTIVE FACTORS

To the world, you may be just one person,

...But to one person, you just may be the world