

with Margaret Paccione-Dyszlewski on ‘trauma-informed care’



You all know children who have been traumatized by a terrible event. These children struggle with emotional, psychological, and physical distress.

Their distress can lead to misbehavior or a loss of attention that can interfere with their learning. Margaret Paccione-Dyszlewski, an expert in trauma care, suggests that school leaders learn more about “trauma-informed care”—and how this approach could guide your schools’ response to children in need.

A psychologist at Bradley Hospital in Rhode Island, the nation’s first neuropsychiatric hospital for children, Paccione-Dyszlewski has more than 30 years of experience helping victims of trauma.

Recently, she spoke with *ASBJ* Senior Editor Del Stover about childhood trauma and how school leaders can take steps to help their young students in need.

How many children are likely to experience worrying degrees of trauma?

It is safe to assume all of your students will, at some point in their lives, experience some degree of trauma that impacts them emotionally and physically. Children live in a complex world, and they may witness or experience physical violence, sexual abuse, bullying, serious accident, the sudden death of a loved one, or some other moment of adversity.

How does trauma affect a child’s behavior—and ability to learn?

Trauma affects all aspects of a child’s development, including relationships, cognitive processing, emotion regulation, and self-esteem. Trauma can be toxic to the brain and the neurological, cognitive development of a child. Certain hormones are excreted into the bloodstream during times of stress, and these hormones can have a significant impact on higher-order functioning such as language development, planning, problem solving, and the ability to pay attention.

Young children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of trauma, which can result in developmental delays in language and cognitive function, difficulty in maintaining attention and concentration, or difficulty in regulating emotions. Repeated exposure to traumatic stress has been associated with significantly higher risk for school disciplinary problems, grade retention, and dropping out.

How would trauma-informed care make a difference?

There needs to be an understanding and awareness among educators of the effects of trauma, and how these effects present themselves in an educational setting.

With these conditions in place, educators can work to create a kinder, gentler environment where children feel free to reveal their trauma. A trauma-informed setting, based on trust and acceptance, can go a long way toward creating a positive learning environment that also can heal and transcend the effects of trauma that children are carrying around.

A trauma-informed approach also will allow educators to make better decisions about interventions—counseling or other professional services—that aid traumatized children.

What can schools do to become more informed about interventions that would assist children?

Awareness is the first step. If we see a child is acting badly, we may question whether we see behavior that’s trauma-driven. When we look at these behaviors—a child raising his voice, cursing, tossing a pencil across the room—we may consider trauma as a root cause, and not just see a child who needs disciplining.

Two good websites to visit are those of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (www.nctsn.org) and the American Association of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (www.aacap.org).