

Guest Commentary

Trauma-informed schools: A must

By Margaret R. Paccione-Dyszlewski, Ph.D.

There is hardly a child who crosses the threshold of a school who does not carry with them a reservoir of trauma. Whether this pain is the size of a pencil case, knapsack, or duffel bag, the odds are that some degree of trauma is present and that it hurts.

Consider the data from a variety of reliable U.S. sources:

- Approximately 3 million children a year have a substantiated maltreatment report, and many, many more children who are abused or neglected go unreported or unfound.
- Ten million children live in unsafe communities and 16 million live in families with an income below the federal poverty level.
- Three to 10 million children annually witness domestic violence.
- One hundred children are killed each year in accidental gun shootings.
- Nearly 11 million children under the age of 18 are being raised in a household with at least one parent suffering with alcoholism. Countless others are affected by parents who are impaired by other psychoactive substances.
- More than 2.7 million children have a parent who is incarcerated, and approximately 10 million have experienced parental incarceration at some point in their young lives.

Add the impact of natural and human-engineered disasters, terrorism, bullying, and the negative emotional toll of having special needs or just being different and hardly a child remains unaffected.

In brief, trauma can be defined as any adverse experience that affects a child's ability to function. Having students in our schools who have experienced trauma has likely been the case since Plato's Academy. What has changed, however, is that we now know that the consequence of prolonged exposure to stress is universal and impacts all major domains of child development. Trauma can be toxic to the brain and can have a permanent impact on the neurological, cognitive development of a child.

Young children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of trauma, which can result in developmental delays in language and cognitive functioning, difficulty in maintaining attention and concentration, and difficulty in regulating emotions and functioning appropriately in a classroom setting.

The urgency of addressing the needs of this special population is articulated in a 2012 policy statement from the American Academy of Pediatrics: "The pediatric community must provide strong, proactive advocacy for more effective interventions for children with symptomatic evidence of toxic stress.... The proposed ecobio-developmental framework (1) incorporates growing evidence of the impact of toxic stress on the developing brain, (2) informs a deeper understanding of the early life origins of both educational failure and adult disease, and (3) underscores the need for collaborative efforts to prevent the long-term consequences of early adversity."

Trauma-informed care is an organizational, structural, and treatment framework that involves understanding, recognizing, and responding to all kinds of trauma. Trauma research provides the backstory behind many student difficulties that plague our educational system. Armed with this knowledge, the time has come for schools to

pivot their cultures to become more trauma-informed. A central concept of a trauma-informed setting is that everyone who interacts with a student assumes that every child has trauma in his/her background and acts accordingly. There needs to be an understanding among educators of the symptoms of toxic stress and how these effects present themselves in a school setting. With these conditions in place, educators can work to create a kinder, gentler environment where children feel free to reveal their trauma. A culture 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 toxic stress.

Schools can no longer be just a place where a child goes just to learn to read and write; they must focus equally on becoming an epicenter of social and emotional development.

Awareness is the first step. If a child presents with challenging behaviors, an enlightened educator views the behavior through the lens of trauma. In a trauma-sensitive culture, when a child raises his voice, curses, is unable to express his needs, tosses a pencil, or is not attending, trauma will be considered as a root cause. Within this framework, the educator will respond with understanding to avoid humiliating the child.

According to author and trauma survivor Danielle Bernock: "Trauma is personal. It does not disappear if it is not validated. When it is ignored or invalidated, the silent screams continue internally heard only by the one held captive. When someone enters the pain and hears the screams, healing can begin." With awareness as a cornerstone, each school community should make every effort to build a trauma-sensitive culture. Staff training across disciplines, integrated trauma-sensitive routines, individual student supports, close collaboration with the behavioral health care community, well-crafted policies and procedures, and targeted, outcome-focused funding will help schools establish environments that will enable all children to succeed.

Schools can no longer be just a place where a child goes just to learn to read and write; they must focus equally on becoming an epicenter of social and emotional development. A shift in school culture to become more trauma-informed will set the stage for maximum academic growth. If educational environments recoil from validating damaging childhood experiences, the toxicity of trauma will corrode the very potential of learning.



Margaret R. Paccione-Dyszlewski, Ph.D., is director of clinical innovation at Bradley Hospital, and clinical assistant professor in the Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior at the Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island.