



Family &
Children's
Trust Fund
OF VIRGINIA

TRAUMA-INFORMED SCHOOLS

ISSUE BRIEF SUMMARY



Across the nation, children are coming to school with traumatic histories that are greatly impacting their school performance. Trauma disrupts the brain's ability to learn; therefore addressing and responding to trauma is essential to the mission and purpose of schools: to educate.

Fortunately, trauma sensitivity can be absorbed into already established classroom practices and school frameworks to help educators develop and maintain environments where all students can thrive.

WHAT IS CHILDHOOD TRAUMA?

Child traumatic stress occurs when a child experiences an intense event that threatens or causes harm to their emotional and physical well-being. Traumatic stressors include domestic abuse; parental separation, mental illness, and incarceration; child abuse and neglect; community violence; and natural disaster.¹

THE ACE STUDY

The Centers of Disease Control (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente's Health Appraisal Clinic performed a landmark study between 1995 and 1997 in which they surveyed the health outcomes and trauma histories of over 17,000 individuals.

The study found that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are strongly related to development of risk factors for disease and well-being throughout the life course including alcoholism, depression and cardiovascular diseases. Since 1997, the results of the ACE study have been widely validated by the CDC's Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS).²

HOW DOES TRAUMA AFFECT THE BRAIN?

Toxic stress, caused by repeated exposure to traumatic events, can damage children's developing brains. When children hear or see a threat, their brain's limbic system, or "survival brain", sends out a red alert signal that releases stress hormones and pushes the prefrontal cortex or the "learning/thinking brain" offline. This response is the normal physiological reaction that keeps humans and animals alive; however when children experience toxic stress, in order to survive they continually need stress hormones to remain hyper-vigilant to their unpredictable environment.

If children live in a state of red alert, they are physiologically unable to learn, because the part of the brain that learns--the prefrontal cortex--has been bumped offline by the limbic system. The slightest provocation, such as an accidental bump in the hallway or a raised voice, may send them into "fight, flight or freeze" mode. When they're triggered, their "survival brain" takes over and shuts down their ability to learn, think rationally and make decisions.

Fortunately, the brain, and especially the child's brain, is malleable and continually changing in response to the environment. If toxic stress stops and is replaced by practices that build resilience, the brain can begin to undo many of the stress induced changes.³

IN VIRGINIA⁴

14%

of children experienced
two or more ACEs

41%

of children experienced
at least one ACE

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WHAT IS RESILIENCE?

Resilience is a person's capacity to adapt successfully to acute stress, trauma, and chronic adversity. Resilience can be strengthened by several protective factors, including:

Individual, such as cognitive ability, self-efficacy, self-regulation, coping strategies, and spirituality;

Familial, such as supportive adult-child interaction, social support; and;

Community characteristics, such as positive school experiences and community resources.⁷

Culture, socioeconomic status and exposure to racism and discrimination all influence resilience. For example, racism and discrimination create stressors in a minority child's life; however, research has shown that valuing cultural traditions and legacies and learning about economic and political histories is predictive of resilience in minority children.⁸

TRAUMA-INFORMED SCHOOLS

Traumatized children respond to their environment with limited access to their prefrontal cortex responsible for thinking, logic, analysis and problem solving. Trauma-informed schools recognize that many problematic students' behaviors reflect a developmental response to their experiences rather than willful, purposeful misbehavior. They reflect a shift from asking "what is wrong with you?" to "what happened to you?"⁵ Educators assume a shared awareness and sensitivity to the potential impact of trauma and adverse experiences on students' lives.

To become trauma-informed, trauma sensitivity must be integrated into all levels of the school system. There is not one single simple formula for becoming trauma-informed, and every education system will need to personalize its strategies to reflect its schools' culture and environment; however, most trauma-informed schools have the following elements in common:

- All school staff understand how trauma impacts learning and work towards a school-wide approach.
- All school staff embrace a shared sense of responsibility for helping every child succeed.
- School staff create an environment where all children feel safe – physically, emotionally, socially and academically.
- Student trauma is addressed in holistic ways – not in a singular program.
- School staff explicitly make children feel like a part of the school community and provide children multiple opportunities to practice newly developing social and behavioral skills.
- School leaders have their pulse on what's happening within their halls and outside of their walls and can respond quickly to needs of students and the surrounding community.
- Schools should view suspension and expulsion as a disciplinary option of last resort.

Integrating trauma sensitivity into education systems requires strong leadership, sustained collaboration and communication, creativity, and patience. Often school administrators and staff initially view trauma-informed approaches as an additional activity to be added to an already, overwhelming agenda of requirements. However, most trauma-informed practices can be infused into already established teaching methods and school practices, and usually will make classroom management, teaching, and disciplinary practices easier and more effective.⁶

Visit fact.virginia.gov/trauma for the full Trauma-Informed Schools Brief.

ENDNOTES

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