

Traumatized Children in our Schools:

Fighting to Survive in a World that Doesn't Understand
Information and Strategies for Teachers

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Preview

“Happiness is not the absence of problems
but the ability to deal with them.”

H. Jackson Brown

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Excerpts from the Opening Text

Introduction

“Empathy means realizing no trauma has discrete edges. Trauma bleeds.”

Leslie Jamison

Trauma is experienced by our children and youth with alarming frequency and often with devastating consequences. For too many children, trauma steals their childhoods and violates who they are and who they will become. Trauma experiences of any kind can result in mental and behavioral health problems that impede adaptive functioning and result in a pattern of negative or hostile interactions and relationships, triggering adverse reactions and devaluation or rejection from others. Interpersonal trauma, violence in particular, often disrupts development and impairs children’s abilities to appropriately relate to, interact with, and respond to those around them.

While trauma occurs in numerous forms and is experienced in one way or another, at varying levels of severity, by a large percentage of our children, this booklet focuses on child maltreatment (abuse and neglect) due to its high prevalence, most often chronic nature, and incredible harm to children, those in their lives, their community, and society. This is likely the most common cause of interpersonal trauma and PTSD experienced by children and adolescents¹, and is probably our nation’s number one health crisis. It is one of the biggest influences in the challenges educators face every day as they try to promote healthy development and achievement.

Child abuse and neglect are not just about insult, injury, pain, or deprivation. Those are wounds that alone can heal. Child maltreatment is devastation in important relationships when those relationships are necessary for the child’s survival, growth, and health, when they set the foundation and build the framework for the child’s entire life. For some it is poor quality construction, for others the foundation is cracked or a few support beams are broken, and for too many the structure is completely damaged or destroyed, leaving little or no anchor or support for the other building blocks in their lives.

The minds, bodies, and souls of maltreated children are violated by those they depend on for love, care, protection, and survival when they cannot care for or protect themselves. Maltreated children have no stability or security when they are most vulnerable and dependent. They grow up in angry, violent worlds, are taught that they are worthless, are taught to hate themselves, and carry those things with them the rest of their lives. We have all also encountered children who are not officially recognized as victims of maltreatment, but they are led to believe they are to blame for the embattled relationships of those they love and upon whom they depend, caught in the cross fire and in some cases used as a weapon.

These children are sitting in your classroom. They desperately need your support and to know that you care for them, value them, and believe in them when the others they depend on do not.

What Trauma Looks Like to You

“Perception and worldview are one's summary of life.”

Asa Don Brown

Maltreated and other severely traumatized children and youth are trying to manage themselves and their lives and survive in a world that for them is terribly unstable, unpredictable, and destructive when they are completely vulnerable and unable to care for themselves. This becomes their worldview, it becomes who they are, and this is what they bring into your classroom. Underneath that hard exterior, behind that façade of apathy, defiance, or aggression, is a child who really hurts.

These children are not choosing to be disruptive or obstructive; they are not willfully causing problems or creating negative lives or hostile relationships for themselves and others; they are trying to survive and get their needs met in the only ways they know how due to situations beyond their control and that are not their fault, and reading, writing, and math are often very low priorities.

The behaviors of traumatized students in the classroom and with peers can take on many forms. Among students substantially affected by trauma some of the commonly occurring behavior patterns are:

- The disruptive student
- The class clown
- The aggressive student
- The hyperactive student
- The bully
- The complacent, passive, or withdrawn student
- The anxious or depressed student
- The people-pleaser
- The social misfit
- The compulsive over-achiever
- The unexplained underachiever
- The apathetic, expressionless student
- The bothersome or disturbed student who tries to escape, ignore, hide from, or tune out from the demands, even the reality of his or her environment.

Sample Strategies

Life Skills

- Many maltreated children really struggle to ask for help or to state their needs. At home they can receive rejection, punitive responses, or hostility when asking for what they need, so they learn that it is safer to not ask. Some are afraid, some do not know how, and some do not even know what they need. Others refuse help when it is offered. Help them learn that they can ask for what they need safely and that their needs are important. Provide encouragement and supportive responsiveness.
- Develop autonomy in troubled or struggling students by helping them learn to work independently, ask questions, and assert themselves appropriately when someone else is being inconsiderate, causing them

undue problems, teasing or bullying them, threatening harm, or denying them their rights.

- Foster internal locus of control by recognizing and teaching students how their effort made them successful and their behavior changed their outcomes. Discourage tendencies to blame others for their mistakes or failures, or to degrade or deny their own abilities and accomplishments.
- Teach and empower the students to participate in and contribute meaningfully to planning and decision-making in classroom rules, activities, and events. Help the students gain a meaningful voice in school decisions and events. Promote leadership opportunities for the students and opportunities to participate in and contribute to team efforts. .
- Model and teach good problem-solving skills for all of your students. This is a critical life skill for everyone, and one that can help maltreated children gain control over their behavior and the outcomes of their efforts.
- Teach them to set goals for themselves, both short and long term, and to plan exactly how to achieve those goals (step by step). Support them through the process of following their plans. Celebrate their progress and successes with them. This teaches them how to take control of what they can and that there can be a positive future for them when they make the effort, while improving executive skills such as forward thinking, metacognition, planning, self-direction, motivation, and organization.
- Peer helping and service learning are important ways for students to learn responsibility, gain self-confidence, and find meaning and purpose for themselves and their lives through service and helping. This can improve their self-concept and help them gain social recognition by making meaningful contributions in their school and community; they learn that they are important and can make a difference. Peer tutoring in particular is also a great way to reinforce skills.
- Learning that it is normal and healthy to make mistakes is so important for all students. In a safe, supportive classroom environment, asking

for help is encouraged, mistakes are accepted and even celebrated as learning and growth opportunities, and all students are taught to encourage each other instead of ridiculing mistakes. As the teacher, you should model acceptance and learning when you make mistakes, and show that you also need help at times.

All of these teach important executive skills that promote self-regulation and self-confidence, allow students to use their intellectual abilities optimally, help them make the most of opportunities for learning and progress, and direct healthy socialization. These skills also help students gain a sense of control where they may have none elsewhere. All of us, no matter our age, need to feel a sense of control in our lives. Disruptive, aggressive, bullying, and manipulative behaviors are often desperate attempts at gaining this.