Chapter 13

Trauma: How Educators Can Support Children and Their Families

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ABSTRACT

Experiencing trauma will impact a child’s development, specifically physically, psychologically (mentally), and emotionally. There is much research on how trauma affects child development, and more information is being addressed on interventions to ameliorate the impact of the symptoms of trauma children experience. Schools play an important role in working with traumatized children and their families. It is through effective collaboration, communication, cognitive behavior interventions, mindfulness techniques to teach self-awareness, social awareness, self-management, responsible decision making, and relationship skills where schools and families may best support the child’s growth and development.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

• What is trauma?
• How does social injustice impact trauma?
• What are some common reactions to trauma and risk factors for trauma?
• How can schools best collaborate with families in addressing trauma?

My past has not defined me, destroyed me, deterred me or defeated me; it has only strengthened me.
-Steve Maraboli

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter addresses trauma inflicted on children, how it impacts the child, as well as the child’s family and the school. When looking at trauma through the lens of Social Justice, it is apparent that a significant disproportionate number of marginalized children have experienced trauma, and due to institutional and societal inequities, continue to be traumatized daily. The school and communities, places that should be safe havens for children, may not be so, and marginalized populations, due to racism, prejudice, and poverty may experience barriers to effective school-home partnerships which is vitally needed to support the child’s healthy outcomes. Due to oppression, and all the risk factors that place marginalized children at risk for experiencing traumatic events, these children face serious challenges and lack of opportunity.

While researching this chapter, the authors soon realized that far too many children have experienced traumatic events in their lives. The World Health Organization Mental Health Organization Surveys addressed traumatic events across 24 countries, and identified 29 possible traumatic event types, with over 70% of respondents reporting a traumatic event and 30.5% exposed to four or more (Bedjet, et al., (2016). How the child and surrounding adults interpret trauma, and the support the child receives, will make the difference in the level of healing that takes place and the amount of time required to heal. Without appropriate intervention, children that experience trauma move into adulthood carrying a heavy burden that manifests itself in many ways, influencing emotional, physical, and mental health.

Much of the literature on trauma addresses its impacts on the child’s developing brain and mental health, and more is being written on how trauma impacts physical health (Felitti, Anda, Nordenberg, Williamson, Spitz, Edwards, & Marks, 1998). The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) study by Felitti et al. (1998), and research on a child’s neurological development (National Scientific Center on the Developing Child, 2012) have helped in describing the connection between exposure to trauma and how child development is negatively impacted (Shonkoff & Garner, 2017). When trauma occurs, the brain is in a state of alarm, terror, and “flight or fight,” which may remain at a high, consistent level, and may continue to be activated by various triggers throughout the child’s life. This impacts the ability to move from survival reaction at the brainstem, to cognitively using portions of the brain that support abstract and concrete thought (specifically the cortex), and may greatly impair learning and life functioning. Acute trauma, or a one-time traumatic event, such as an automobile accident or a loss of someone, affects concentration, memory, thoughts, emotions, and relationships. Chronic trauma, and/or Complex trauma, impairs executive functioning, organization, goal setting, and anticipating consequences, by distorting representations of one’s world and relationships. (Child Welfare Committee, National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2008). The good news is that we know that brain development has a plasticity to change throughout a child’s life, which can alter the effects of trauma (Pynoos, Fairbank, Steinberg, Amaya-Jackson, Gerrity, Mount, & Maze (2008). Schools are realizing and attempting to address risk factors related to trauma, and to support children who have experienced trauma. This chapter addresses some primary events that are traumatic, as well as how schools may collaborate with families to support children who have experienced trauma.

Specifically, this chapter will:

1. Define trauma.
2. Identify risk factors of trauma such as poverty; racism that children of the global majority experience; gender and gender identity; and environmental factors such as violence, bullying, neglect, and abuse.