



Childhood Adversity

Trauma-Informed Schools

Jamie B. Matthews, Ed. S.

TAKE THE FIRST STEP IN FAITH.
YOU DON'T NEED TO SEE THE
WHOLE STAIRCASE; JUST THE FIRST
STEP.

-MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.



Overcoming
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Childhood Adversity

Impact on Development

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Early experiences are built into our bodies, creating biological "memories" that shape development, for better or for worse.

Center on the Developing Child, Harvard

Adverse Childhood Experiences Data

What are ACEs?

The ACE study looked at three categories of abuse, neglect, and dysfunction

How common are ACEs?

ACEs are prevalent (70% of people having at least one by age 16)

Having one raises the risk of having more than one by 88%

The pandemic intensified the impacts of existing ACEs

Trauma + Development

5 Bs of Trauma: Brain, Biology, Behavior, Body, and Beliefs

hardwired children for fight or flight, sensory processing impacted and shown through over or under reactions to stimuli

Brain scans of 3 year-olds show ACEs can cause changes in the brain identical to those caused by dementia

Emotional age of the child may be half the chronological age of the child.

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Impact on Education

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Either we spend time meeting children's emotional needs by filling their cups with love or we spend the time dealing with behaviors caused from their unmet needs.

Either way, we spend the time.

Pam Leo



ACEs in the Classroom

Learning

Students with 3+ Aces are 300% more likely to fail a grade

Six times more likely to have behavior concerns stemming from unmet needs

Score lower on standardized tests

5x more likely to have severe attendance problems

Higher designation to Special Ed.

World View

Overall low self-image and motivation

Basic mistrust of others, anxious, fearful

Deep sense of hopelessness and lack of control, often seeking to get control in unhealthy ways

Behaviors

Often seek to feel safe through control, aggression, or manipulation

Survival strategy vs. willful disobedience

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Trauma-Informed Schools

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What is a trauma-informed or compassionate school?

Compassionate schools educate school staff on how experiencing traumatic events (also known as ACEs- adverse childhood experiences) impact students' abilities to effectively learn. Through trainings and resource materials, educators learn how trauma impacts the brain development, the importance of relationships and connections with students, and strategies to foster resilience.

These practices benefit students from all backgrounds and are preventive in nature.



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Childhood Adversity Trauma-Informed Schools

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Necessary Elements for Transformation

- Members of school leadership prioritize physiological safety for students and staff throughout the school environment. This commitment must be modeled from the top.
- All school staff have a baseline level of training and take part in ongoing process conversations to understand how stress impacts the brain, the prevalence and importance of ACEs and trauma, regulation skills (to support themselves, students, and colleagues), the difference between therapy and therapeutic intervention, and reflection about what is working and what needs to improve.
- Relationship development and maintenance are valued within the school, with students' caregivers and other community stakeholders working to create a whole community of support.
- School personnel view behavior as an adaptive way of communicating unmet needs rather than an act of defiance. Appropriate measures are taken to repair harm when harm is done, but punishment without opportunity for a do-over and opportunity for restoration is avoided at all costs.



Childhood Adversity Trauma-Informed Data

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Outcomes

Staff Training

Initial all-staff training ensured buy-in and consistent language and focus across the board

Policy + Practice

Trauma-responsive policies were integrated that shifted from punitive punishments to restorative practices

Impact on Discipline

- 60% fewer referrals
- 90% fewer suspensions
- 70% fewer fights

Impact on Academic Achievement

- Entire school passing across domains
- 55% increase in math standardized test scores
- Increased time in the classroom

School Climate

- Truancy decreased
- Educator retention increased
- Safety, prevention for shootings, etc.

Graduation Data

- Fivefold increase in graduation rates
- Threefold increase in college-bound

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The High Cost

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Unaddressed ACEs Strain Systems

Education System

- Students struggling from trauma may escalate quickly, especially when threatened by staff or other students, causing them to act out in ways that can compromise safety .
- Effects of unaddressed trauma can compromise a school's fundamental mission to promote academic achievement.
- Education systems are burdened with disproportionately high mental health and psychological evaluation caseloads .
- Educators and support staff are fleeing the field in droves due to burnout from dealing with toxic stress (both theirs and that of students).

Medical System

- Early incidents of 4 or more ACEs are statistically shown to have positive correlation with stroke, heart disease, depression, cancer, diabetes, obesity and premature death by up to 20 years.
- ACEs cost between \$550 billion and \$1 trillion annually in medical care in the U.S.

Workforce

- The annual cost of ACEs in loss of productivity in the workforce is \$748 billion.



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A Call to Action

We must prioritize funding for trauma-informed policy and practices, training including accompanying resources and ongoing coaching, to be implemented from the top. Educators must be extended the same compassionate regard with which they are expected to have for their students. Community collaboration and utilization of funds to expand the knowledge of trauma's impact and the power of NEAR (neurobiology, epigenetics, ACEs and resilience) science to are essential next steps. Empowering students and their families with trauma-informed tools is a transformative two-generation approach to see schools and communities move from surviving to thriving.

Allocating funding, creating buy-in through awareness and advocacy, writing legislation to support trauma-informed policy and practice under the advisement of professionals in the field modeling systems that are already successfully implementing trauma-informed practices is recommended. Thank you!

Pertinent legislation:

RISE From Trauma Act (S. 2086)

Community Mental Health and Resilience Act (H.R. 3073) (S.1452)



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