

Understanding Trauma's Impact on Learning

A pathway to creating a school culture where every child living through adversity can grow alongside peers

BY SUSAN F. COLE/*School Administrator, February 2019*



Susan Cole, director of the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative at Harvard Law School and Massachusetts Advocates for Children, believes the most effective school settings weave trauma sensitivity into other affairs of the school day.

The principal of a small elementary school in central Massachusetts was approached by his staff with a request. They asked about their school becoming more responsive to trauma owing to the number of children in their classrooms who seemed to be facing adversity in their lives.

The principal met with the school nurse and the school district psychologist who was assigned to work with students at his rural school to discuss the matter. Together, they reviewed the records of students who were homeless or in foster care or otherwise had a known traumatic history.

"I was shocked when I realized how high the numbers were and stunned to see the overlap between these students and those who were functioning below grade level academically," the principal stated. "While not all the children with traumatic histories were struggling, it was clear to me that adversity was a strong predictor of challenges in school and that we could not in

good conscience ignore a plan for addressing the role of trauma in our school."

That recognition was the launching point for this school making its entire environment trauma-sensitive. The effort started with setting up a learning community for staff to become more knowledgeable about how trauma affects a student's ability to focus, behave appropriately and

learn. The school's administrators, teachers and staff read *Helping Traumatized Children Learn (Vol. 1)* and identified their priorities, including the need for a calmer environment, a steering committee to guide the work and involvement of all staff.

Under the principal's leadership, staff created "peace corners" — physical spaces where students could learn how to self-regulate their behavior. The number of disciplinary office referrals began to drop sharply.

Trauma Familiarity

Creating such a school climate is not easy. Ensuring students reach their full potential requires commitment. Educators must work collaboratively to change negative cultures that often result in the overuse of expulsion as a disciplinary option, while at the same time closing the achievement gap, eliminating pernicious bullying, teaching social and emotional skills and shutting down the school-to-prison pipeline.

Clearly, a single program or a set of services is not enough to change existing school culture. A safe and supportive school climate is one where all students can learn, behave appropriately and form relationships with adults and peers.

Natalie Pohl, principal of Manthala George Jr. Elementary School in Brockton, Mass., has begun this challenging work to better serve her 900-plus students, many of them economically disadvantaged. She was familiar with the principles of trauma-sensitive schools from her work at other Brockton schools.

"I knew that using a trauma-sensitive approach would help us create the culture and climate that our students, families and staff needed," Pohl says.

As the steering committee of the school gained in strength under her leadership, it provided the essential guidance for becoming a safe and supportive school community. Over the past four years, Pohl cites "increased staff communication and collaboration, as well as a willingness to try new ideas to support challenging students."

Widespread Incidence

More children than ever have lived through adversities, ranging from abuse to homelessness, from bullying at school to community violence to domestic violence. The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study, an ongoing two-decades-old research project conducted by Kaiser Permanente and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, found shockingly high numbers of mostly white, middle-class adults reported abuse and/or challenging family experiences during childhood. The research asked participants about their experiences of

childhood adversity: being subjected to physical, sexual or psychological abuse; witnessing domestic violence; and living with a parent afflicted with a mental illness or involved in substance abuse or criminal behavior. More than half the adults stated they had had experiences in at least one of these categories as children.

If we also consider the number of students who are or have been chronically bullied, live with homelessness or in the proximity of community violence, are refugees from war-torn countries, are shuttled around in the foster care system, survive natural disasters, undergo multiple invasive medical procedures, or live with a parent traumatized by combat, we get a sense of the extraordinary amount and severity of the adversity that too many children are experiencing.

The fact is, every school has students who have experienced highly traumatic events. Recognizing the breadth and depth of the underlying challenges — and accepting that we won't always know or need to know what happened — is essential to a discussion of what to do.

Trauma Response

Trauma does not always begin and end with a particular event. Often it is an enduring response to overwhelming experiences, such as abuse, bullying at school, a parents' addiction, racism or oppression.

Many factors, including age, temperament, gender and sustaining relationships in a child's life, influence the response to stressful events. Not all children experiencing adversity develop a trauma response. Some are more vulnerable than others, and no two children — even those from the same family who may have lived through the same traumatic events — will necessarily have the same response. However confusing the behavior may be, negative experiences can impact even the most resilient child's ability to succeed at school.

The impact of trauma affects students in terms of academics, behavior and relationships.

» **ACADEMICS.** Learning to read, write, engage in discussion and solve math problems requires an ability to trust, organize, comprehend, remember and produce work. Another prerequisite for achieving classroom competency is the ability to self-regulate attention, emotions and behavior. Not surprisingly, trauma resulting from overwhelming experiences has the power to disturb a student's development of these foundations for learning in these ways:

» undermine the acquisition of language and communication skills;

» compromise the ability to attend to classroom tasks and instructions;

- » interfere with the ability to organize and remember new information; and
- » hinder understanding of cause-and-effect relationships.

All of these skills are necessary to take in information at school.

» **BEHAVIOR.** Unfortunately, many traumatized children develop behavioral coping mechanisms that can frustrate educators and bring out exasperated reprisals — reactions that both strengthen the child’s expectations of confrontation and danger and reinforce a negative self-image. Many effects of trauma on classroom behavior originate from the same problems that create academic difficulties: the inability to self-regulate emotions, distorted perceptions of the behaviors and feelings of others, and the inability to process social cues and convey feelings in an appropriate manner.

This behavior can be highly confusing to educators, and students suffering from the behavioral impacts of trauma often are profoundly misunderstood. Teachers who catch a student who is “tuned out” during class may perceive the student is unmotivated rather than troubled.

Whether a student who has experienced traumatic events externalizes (acts out) or internalizes (withdraws or acts numb, frozen or depressed), his or her behavioral response to traumatic events can lead to lost learning and strained relationships with teachers and peers. These students may retreat in class because they are overloaded emotionally. When students are in “survival” mode and barely coping, their brain cannot focus and process additional information.

» **RELATIONSHIPS.** Children’s struggles with traumatic stress and their insecure relationships with adults inside and outside school can adversely affect their relationships with school personnel and with peers. Students may distrust adults and/or fellow students and be unsure of the security of the school setting generally. These students may suffer delays in developing the kind of healthy interpersonal relationships with their teachers and peers they so desperately need.

School Responses

The best solution is to create an environment that weaves trauma sensitivity into all school operations so children can feel safe and supported and be successful throughout the school day.

Some years ago, Claire Crane, a principal at Ford Elementary School in Lynn, Mass., provided staff with training to respond to trauma symptoms. The story of a student named George (a pseudonym), who was dealing with domestic violence and struggling academically, reveals the

power of helping a student.

Staff were worried when George's truancy increased dramatically. At a staff meeting to discuss the situation, staff focused on his interests, talents and abilities rather than punishment. A teacher mentioned he liked baseball. Normally, his poor grades would make him ineligible for the team, but they conditionally allowed him to be on the team. First, he had to write a paper and sign a pledge that his participation was contingent on keeping up his grades. The intervention was successful.

Crane's story illustrates how educators benefit from a process to collaborate on the priorities of a school, and principals should engage staff on creating appropriate interventions.

Creating trauma-sensitive schools has much in common with what many well-run schools already do. They identify priorities, such as learning jointly, coalition building, planning and evaluation. What is different at a trauma-sensitive school is that the awareness about trauma's impact on learning becomes a primary motivator for taking action. Through more learning and reflective conversations, a sense of urgency grows into a deeper awareness of the pervasive role trauma plays at school and how addressing it can improve students' educational accomplishments.

From this foundational awareness, a small coalition can engage the entire staff in reflective schoolwide trauma-sensitive action planning. The goal is for schools to become trauma-sensitive learning communities where new ideas and expansive thinking are nurtured and where teamwork makes it possible for complex issues to be explored.

Replicating Success

If school system leaders wonder whether they can replicate the successes of schools, I point them to the rigorous research of the American Institutes of Research. A 2018 study of five schools in Massachusetts that were using the trauma-sensitive approach set forth in *Helping Traumatized Children Learn (Vol. 2)* found that an understanding of trauma can lead to shifts in thinking which, when combined with a process of change, can "help change school culture and create conditions for teaching and learning."

According to the study, the key outcomes in the first two years included fewer crises, schools feeling "safer" and "calmer, decreased disciplinary referrals and acts of misbehavior, increased staff communication and cohesion, improved staff-student relationships and more parent communication and engagement.

This approach values the expertise of educators to work together in a team and uses inquiry to

identify challenges and solutions through a trauma-sensitive lens.

SUSAN COLE is director of the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, a joint program of Harvard Law School in Cambridge, Mass., and Massachusetts Advocates for Children.

Additional Resources

Susan Cole and her colleagues have written two books relating to the impact of trauma on learning and how to create a trauma-sensitive school. Additional information on the topic can be found at <https://traumasensitiveschools.org>.

» *Helping Traumatized Children Learn (Vol. 1)* by Susan F. Cole et al., Massachusetts Advocates for Children, Boston, Mass.

» *Creating and Advocating for Trauma-Sensitive Schools (Vol. 2)* by Susan F. Cole et al., Massachusetts Advocates for Children, Boston, Mass.

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C.J. Reid - Associate
Executive Director,
Governance,
Membership &
Affiliate Services
creid@aasa.org



Lori Vines -
Assistant
Director,
Membership &
Affiliate Services
lvines@aasa.org

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|Phone: 703-528-0700 | info@aasa.org