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# Childhood Trauma: What Is It, And How To Help Our Students Heal

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CHILDHOOD TRAUMA: WHAT IT IS, AND HOW TO HELP OUR STUDENTS HEAL

By

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Education

Hamline University

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In order to fulfill the requirements for the Master's in Education program, the research question I chose to answer was *how can teachers and support staff address childhood trauma in the elementary classroom and larger elementary school environment?*

Due to a lack of information and professional development in this area, I chose to complete a Capstone Project, developing a staff training that will be given three times during the academic year. The project consists of Powerpoints, surveys, handouts, and speakers from outside out school community. The intended audience for this presentation is the school and support staff of an urban elementary school. The project is formatted in a user-friendly way:

Presentation #1: Survey leading up to the presentation. Presentation consisting of an intro to childhood trauma, it's definitions, and what specific traumas students have experienced in this school. There will be a note-taking handout for teachers and support staff to use.

Presentation #2: Classroom and school-wide strategies teachers and support staff can incorporate in order to create a trauma-informed school and classroom. There will be an opportunity to create some hands-on calming strategies as well.

Presentation #3: Community resources that are available to teachers and support staff.

There is also a post-survey given to teachers. The pre- and post-surveys are designed to give me feedback in order to understand if I have answered my Capstone question.

# CHILDHOOD TRAUMA

**Presentation 1: Definition, and building-specific experiences.**

# WHAT IS CHILDHOOD TRAUMA?

CHILDHOOD TRAUMA IS A SUDDEN OR UNEXPECTED EVENT THAT THREATENS A CHILD'S LIFE OR BODY, AND GIVES THE CHILD FEELINGS OF INTENSE TERROR, HORROR OR HELPLESSNESS. A FEW EXAMPLES OF CHILDHOOD TRAUMA ARE: CHILDHOOD SEXUAL ABUSE, PHYSICAL DOMESTIC ABUSE, NEGLECT, NATURAL DISASTERS, MAN-MADE DISASTERS, AND LIFE-THREATENING ILLNESS. ADDITIONAL EXAMPLES TO WHAT CONSTITUTES CHILDHOOD TRAUMA: PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL, AND SEXUAL ABUSE, AS WELL AS PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL NEGLECT, PARENT MENTAL ILLNESS, PARENTAL SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND DEPENDENCE, AND PARENTAL SEPARATION AND DIVORCE.

## REPERCUSSIONS

HIGHER RISK OF DEVELOPING ANY NUMBER OF MENTAL HEALTH, PHYSICAL, AND/OR BEHAVIORAL DIFFICULTIES.

NEUROPHYSIOLOGICAL STRESS RESPONSE THAT CAN INTERFERE WITH A CHILD'S ABILITY TO REGULATE THEIR EMOTIONS AND BEHAVIOR BY THEMSELVES CHILDREN ARE ESPECIALLY VULNERABLE TO TRAUMA BECAUSE THEIR BRAINS ARE STILL DEVELOPING.

PARTICULARLY TOXIC FOR CHILDREN.

## REPERCUSSIONS

ADAPTATION TO TRAUMA MEANS THAT CHILDREN ARE PREPARED TO FIGHT, FLEE,  
OR DISSOCIATE FROM TRAUMATIC MEMORIES AND/OR HIGH-STRESS SITUATION. THIS  
TENDS TO RESULT IN VIOLENT OUTBURSTS, FLEEING THE SITUATION, AND LACK OF  
ENGAGEMENT.

## SITE-SPECIFIC TRAUMA

ABUSE

NEGLECT

HOUSING INSECURITY

DIVORCE

# CHILDHOOD TRAUMA

## Classroom strategies

### STRATEGIES:

IN A CLASSROOM SETTING, TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES INCLUDE BOTH SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT, AND PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS.

TRAUMA-INFORMED CLASSROOMS ARE ONES THAT PROVIDE A SAFE, NURTURING, AND CONSISTENT ENVIRONMENT WHILE GIVING CHILDREN CONTROL OVER SOME ASPECT OF THEIR SCHOOL DAY.

SOS AS A WAY TO TEACH CHILDREN TO COPE WITH TRAUMA REMINDERS:

STOP STOP YOUR BODY AND TAKE DEEP BREATHS

ORIENT LOOK AROUND AND NOTICE YOUR SURROUNDINGS

SEEK HELP USE A GROUNDING TECHNIQUE TO HELP CALM DOWN

## STRATEGIES

BREATHING TECHNIQUES, EXERCISE, MEDITATION, AND MINDFULNESS ARE OTHER TOOLS THAT CAN BE USED AND TAUGHT IN A TRAUMA-INFORMED CLASSROOM.

INCORPORATING POSITIVE SELF-TALK AND A GROWTH MINDSET ARE OTHER VALUABLE TOOLS TO PUT IN PLACE IN THE TRAUMA-INFORMED CLASSROOM.



# STRATEGIES

STOMPING FEET

ROCKING IN GLIDER

BREATHING TECHNIQUES

MUSIC

CLAPPING HANDS

WALKING/RUNNING

JUMPING ROPE

STRETCHING

TOSSING BALL (LARGE)

DRUMMING

COLD/HOT DRINK

SHAKING OUT FEET/HANDS

PETTING/HOLDING A PET

HUMMING

LOOKING AT FISH IN A TANK

BLOWING BUBBLES

PLAYING WITH A FAVORITE TOY

## MINDFULNESS

MINDFULNESS IS "A MENTAL STATE ACHIEVED BY FOCUSING ONE'S AWARENESS ON THE PRESENT MOMENT, WHILE CALMLY ACKNOWLEDGING AND ACCEPTING ONE'S FEELINGS, THOUGHTS, AND BODILY SENSATIONS, USED AS A THERAPEUTIC TECHNIQUE. MINDFULNESS CAN PLAY AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN HEALTH, MENTAL WELL-BEING, COMPETENCE, AND SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S ABILITY TO COPE WITH DAILY STRESSES AND CHALLENGES. THIS IS ESPECIALLY ESSENTIAL IN A TRAUMA-INFORMED CLASSROOM, AS CHILDREN WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED TRAUMA TEND TO REACT STRONGER TO STRESS AND UNEXPECTED CHANGES. THOSE THINGS CAN BE TRIGGERS

## GROWTH-MINDSET

CREATING A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT BASED IN GROWTH MINDSET GIVES CHILDREN AN OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN TO WORK THROUGH FRUSTRATION IN ORDER TO BUILD STRONG WORK HABITS THAT WILL LEAD TO ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND SUCCESS. GROWTH MINDSET IN A TRAUMA-INFORMED CLASSROOM GIVES STUDENTS AN OPPORTUNITY TO SEE THEIR SITUATION AS EVER-CHANGING VERSUS FIXED, AND GIVES THEM AN OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN STRATEGIES TO COPE AND WORK THROUGH DIFFICULTY TO FIND SUCCESS.

# COMMUNITY RESOURCES

-WILDER FOUNDATION

-WOMEN'S ADVOCATES

-REGIONS HOSPITAL-PEDIATRIC TRAUMA UNIT

-LUTHERAN SOCIAL SERVICES OF MINNESOTA

-MINNESOTA ASSOCIATION FOR CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH

-NATIONAL CHILD TRAUMATIC STRESS NETWORK

# VICARIOUS TRAUMA

VICARIOUS TRAUMA, WHICH AT TIMES IS CALLED COMPASSION FATIGUE, IS A TERM THAT IS ASSOCIATED WITH CARING FOR THOSE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED TRAUMA. IT IS BELIEVED THAT TEACHERS EXPERIENCE THIS BECAUSE OF THE WORK THEY DO. VICARIOUS TRAUMA IS THE EMOTIONAL RESIDUE LEFT OVER WHEN WORKING WITH A POPULATION THAT HAS EXPERIENCED TRAUMA, AND HELPING THOSE CHILDREN WORK THROUGH THEIR PAIN, FEAR, AND TERROR. TYPICALLY, VICARIOUS TRAUMA HAS A SIMILAR EFFECT ON TEACHER'S BRAINS AS IT DOES ON STUDENT'S BRAINS: THE BRAIN EMITS A FEAR RESPONSE, WHICH RELEASES CORTISOL AND ADRENALINE. THIS CAUSES AN INCREASED HEART RATE, BLOOD PRESSURE, RESPIRATION, AND RELEASES A FLOOD OF EMOTIONS. THIS BIOLOGICAL RESPONSE ALSO MANIFESTS PHYSICAL AND MENTAL SYMPTOMS AS WELL. DESPITE THIS, TEACHERS ARE NOT TAUGHT HOW TO ADDRESS HOW TRAUMA AFFECTS THEIR PERSONAL LIVES.



COMMUNITY  
RESOURCES

## Appendix B

QUESTIONS    RESPONSES    Total points: 0

Please help us plan a professional development that will address staff need around supporting children who've experienced childhood trauma.

I have students in my classroom who are currently experiencing trauma.

Yes

No

I have students in my classroom who have experienced trauma in their past.

Yes

No

I feel able to support students when they experience behavioral struggles, due to the trauma they've experienced.

1    2    3    4    5

Not at all.                        Completely.

I can identify strategies to make my classroom more trauma-informed.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly agree

## Appendix C

QUESTIONS    RESPONSES    Total points: 0

### Childhood Trauma Professional Development- Post-Training Information

Form description

I feel able to support students when they experience behavioral struggles, due to the trauma they've experienced.

1    2    3    4    5

Not at all.                        Completely.

I can identify strategies to make my classroom more trauma-informed.

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly agree

Appendix D

Childhood Trauma Training - Session #1

New Learning	
Questions	
Resources	
What I Need Next	



## Appendix E

### Community Resources Contact Sheet

Wilder Foundation  
451 Lexington Avenue South  
Saint Paul, MN 55104

Women's Advocates  
588 Grand Avenue  
Saint Paul, MN 55102

Regions Hospital  
640 Jackson Street  
Saint Paul, MN 55101

Lutheran Social Services of Minnesota  
2485 Como Avenue  
Saint Paul, MN 55108

Minnesota Association for Children's Mental Health  
23 Empire Drive, Suit 1000  
Saint Paul, MN 55103

National Child Traumatic Stress Network  
<https://www.nctsn.org/>

Take-away links for teachers to revisit as needed:

## **Creating Trauma-Sensitive Schools to Improve Learning**

Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS): [http://rti.dpi.wi.gov/rti\\_pbis](http://rti.dpi.wi.gov/rti_pbis)

Creating Trauma-Sensitive Schools to Improve Learning:

[http://sspw.dpi.wi.gov/sspw\\_mhtrauma](http://sspw.dpi.wi.gov/sspw_mhtrauma)

Integrating mindfulness into school: <http://www.mindfulschools.org/resources/room-to-breathe/>

Calmer Classrooms: A Guide to Working with Traumatized Children:

[http://www.ocsc.vic.gov.au/downloads/calmer\\_classrooms.pdf](http://www.ocsc.vic.gov.au/downloads/calmer_classrooms.pdf)

Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators:

[http://www.nctsn.org/nctsn\\_assets/pdfs/Child\\_Trauma\\_Toolkit\\_Final.pdf](http://www.nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/Child_Trauma_Toolkit_Final.pdf)

Creating Sanctuary in Schools:

<http://www.sanctuaryweb.com/Documents/Sanctuary%20in%20the%20School.pdf>

Helping Traumatized Children Learn: <http://www.massadvocates.org/download-book.php>

The Heart of Learning and Teaching Compassion, Resiliency and Academic Success:

<http://k12.wa.us/CompassionateSchools/HeartofLearning.aspx>

### **Websites for educators**

The Impact of Trauma on Learning: <http://www.sch-psych.net/archives/001169.php>

The Language of Trauma and Loss: <http://westernreservepublicmedia.org/trauma/>

National Child Traumatic Stress Network: <http://www.nctsn.org>

School Mental Health Project: <http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/>



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