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

Melissa C. Andretta
CHILDHOOD TRAUMA: WHAT IT IS, AND HOW TO HELP OUR STUDENTS HEAL

By

Melissa C. Andretta

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

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Primary Advisor: Evan Matson
Capstone Project Facilitator: Kelly Killorn-Moravec
Content Expert: Teresa Chavez
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 our 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, its 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 situations. 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

Stamping feet
Rocking in glider
Breathing techniques
Music
Clapping hands
Waking/warming
Jumping rope
Stretching
Toys big/ball (large)

Drumming
Cold/hot drink
Shaking out feet/hands
Petting/holding a pet
Humming
Looking at you 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

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

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>QUESTIONS</th>
<th>RESPONSES</th>
<th>Total points: 0</th>
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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.

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<td></td>
<td>Not at all.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Completely.</td>
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I can identify strategies to make my classroom more trauma-informed.
- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree
Appendix C

Childhood Trauma Professional Development-Post-Training Information

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
# Childhood Trauma Training - Session #1

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<th>New Learning</th>
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<th>What I Need Next</th>
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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

Creating Trauma-Sensitive Schools to Improve Learning:

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:


Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators:

http://www.nctsn.org/nctsn_assets/pdfs/Child_Trauma_Toolkit_Final.pdf

Creating Sanctuary in Schools:


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/


School Mental Health Project: http://www.smhp.psych.ucla.edu/
Reference List for Project


Minero, E. (2017). When students are traumatized, teachers are too. Retrieved from:


