

Staff training, peer awareness benefit trauma-afflicted students

Nearly half of all children in the U.S. have experienced at least one or more types of serious childhood trauma, according to the National Survey of Children's Health conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The impact of trauma negatively affects student attendance, learning, and achievement. By educating staff on child trauma, warning signs, and proper response, you can create support structures for students impacted by trauma.

Key points

- Trauma impacts attendance, learning, achievement.
- Emotional outbursts often warning sign of trauma.
- Train all personnel on trauma, de-escalation skills.

"Young people who've experienced trauma have an overwhelming desire for a safe environment," said Terri Howard, senior director at FEI Behavioral Health, a crisis management firm in Milwaukee.

Trauma can affect people both biologically and neurologically. For instance, students who've had trauma may have problems controlling emotions. "A simple classroom request can make a child very frustrated, not necessarily because they don't know the answer, but because they don't have the capacity," Howard said. "When people experience trauma, there's a part of the brain that is affected that controls managing emotions. A child may overreact to a situation, which may be as a result of trauma."

Howard provided the following strategies to support students who've been impacted by trauma:

- **Increase awareness.** Teachers should be trained in trauma-informed approaches, as well as de-escalation skills and techniques. "That isn't something that comes innate to people working with children," Howard said. "The biggest mistake educators make is re-traumatizing the child. It's not uncommon for a teacher to yell 'Calm down!' at a disruptive student." However, doing so may escalate the situation because someone who has experienced trauma may not be capable to control the emotion. Instead of telling the child to sit and behave, the student may need to be escorted out of the room to take a quick walk, Howard said. "Understand the need for personal space for students who've experienced trauma."

- **Build peer relationships.** Teacher lesson plans should incorporate team-building and teamwork from

the beginning of the school year, Howard said. Those strategies can also be used in the lunch room and playground. "You're promoting getting kids together, making connections, understanding each other, and appreciating diversity," Howard said.

- **Ensure teacher training.** "My recommendation would be a cascading model where some people in the building are trained as instructors on working with students who've experienced trauma," Howard said. "Those instructors can then share the information with other staff members." As a result, the training is not a one-time event, but rather it becomes part of the school culture, she added.

- **Cast a wide net.** Auxiliary staff such as cafeteria workers and bus drivers should also be included in the training. "Those children need to feel a sense of safety and connection," Howard said. "Lunch and playground staff, paraprofessionals, and bus drivers are all important people in the student's life outside of the classroom. They should be aware of the strategies so they can make connections with students."

- **Strive for continuity.** If a child has an IEP, chances are the cafeteria aide and the SRO are not informed. "In some way, we need to have a larger collaborative team so that everyone is consistently following the plan," Howard said. "There are opportunities for [a] multi-disciplinary team within the school that looks at ways to socially assist and support students in trauma. Consider a trauma-informed committee made up of different factions of school personnel."

- **Engage school counselors.** School counselors and support staff have become increasingly overwhelmed in terms of counselor-to-student ratios, Howard said. However, counselors play a vital role with students who may have experienced trauma. "These days, counselors ... don't have the capacity to have a case load of all children who may have experienced trauma," she said. "Tap into your district's EAP for a referral of mental health professionals in the area."

- **Get parents on board.** There may be parents who are unaware that their child has experienced trauma. "For example, a parent who is a survivor of domestic violence may not focus on the impact that the violence had on the child," Howard said. "Make parents aware of the impact of trauma on children. The same skills that teachers are learning should be imparted to parents." IEP meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and school open houses present opportunities to pass along information to parents about trauma-informed approaches, she added.

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