

Supporting the Learning, Growth, and Success of Our Students in the Face of

TRAUMA

Most researchers describe trauma as “the response to a deeply distressing or disturbing event that overwhelms an individual’s ability to cope.”¹ The inability to cope can cause the individual to feel helpless, lose his or her sense of self, and be unable to experience a full range of emotional states.² The word *trauma*, when applied to children, is defined by Levine and Kline³ as an intense experience that suddenly shocks and overwhelms a child, taking away his or her sense of security and control. It is also characterized as an invisible factor affecting a child’s ability to learn.⁴ Trauma is further defined as an acute form of suffering—and, indeed, the issue of suffering is at the very heart of Christianity.⁵

Educators are adept at meeting the academic, social-emotional, and spiritual needs of the students they serve. However, teachers and administrators need to also be concerned about the impact of trauma on children and their ability to perform and thrive in the educational setting. In the United States alone, more than 46 million children are impacted by trauma each year, with one in 10 facing five or more violent incidents, according to the U.S. Department of Justice’s Defending Childhood Initiative.⁶ Children exposed to repetitive trauma are at risk for a variety of physical and mental-health issues—anxiety, depression, high blood pressure, substance abuse—that also affect their ability to learn.⁷

Understanding the importance of trauma-informed education is imperative because a stressed brain can’t learn. This assertion is backed by compelling brain research, which reveals how sensing danger affects the cognitive functioning of human beings.⁸ The neuroregulatory systems that help humans to manage stress throughout their lives are extremely impressionable during early childhood. “Toxic levels of stress during this period can affect the development of the neuroregulatory systems in ways that cause those systems to become overly responsive to shut down in response to a wide range of stressors in later life.”⁹ Childhood trauma can affect different parts of the brain as noted below:¹⁰

- Reduced activity in Broca’s area can make it difficult for people to talk about trauma and describe it with detail.
- The interruption to the growth of the hippocampus can affect attention, learning, and memory.
- When the corpus collosum, which connects the left and right sides of the brain, is reduced due to trauma, the ability of the two sides of the brain to work in a coordinated way is compromised.
- Changes to amygdala function can make people more likely to react to triggers, especially emotional ones, causing them to experience emotional extremes and making it more difficult for them to regulate their emotions.

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- Reduced activity in different parts of the frontal lobes of the cerebral cortex can mean that survival responses are triggered even in the absence of danger.

- Changes in “reward pathways” can mean that survivors anticipate less pleasure from life and may appear less motivated.

Understanding the impact that trauma can have on brain development magnifies the importance for educators to examine, understand, and use effective approaches to support children during as well as after experiencing trauma. While there is no simple approach to support children who are experiencing/have experienced trauma, several techniques can create and sustain a learning environment in which educators are more closely in touch with their students’ needs and have the attitudes and skills necessary to intervene and support self-regulation and coping skills that support student success.

However, before we examine these strategies and approaches, we must first understand God’s thoughts about and approaches to handling trauma. Despite what we think or feel, we must know that God is present during and in control of human suffering. Sometimes it is difficult to recognize the His presence in the midst of suffering. Think about David when he cried out, “Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?” (Psalm 13:1, NIV).¹¹ Or what about Jeremiah, who felt his heartfelt prayers were going unanswered (Lamentations 3:8)? And how could we possibly forget Job, who experienced loss after loss and was sure that God was not listening to his pleas for answers, or his cry for relief (Job 9:16). Even our Savior, the one who can empathize with our pain, at the height of His pain cried out, “‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Matthew 27:46).

Yet God tells us over and over that He is there for us (Isaiah 41:10). He is in the midst of our suffering (Isaiah 43:2), and He will never leave us nor forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6). The lyrics to *When I Cry* by Marshall Hall and Benjamin Gaither sum it up for me perfectly:

When I cry, You cry
When I hurt, You hurt
When I’ve lost someone
It takes a piece of You, too
And when I fall on my face
You fill me with grace
'Cause nothin' breaks Your heart
Or tears You apart
Like when I cry¹²

God cares for us. He is there for us in the midst of our suffering, even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Buoying students who have experienced trauma, developing their resiliency, and helping parents to become agents of change are some of the approaches we as educators can take¹³ to champion our students through challenging times. According to Withers, trauma-informed care means treating the whole person and taking into account past or current trauma as well as the resulting coping mechanisms when attempting to meet the needs of students.

We may never know the full extent of what our students have experienced or are experiencing, as their scars may not be visible. Caring educators know that understanding and responding to what’s causing stress in our students is part of keeping them healthy, safe, engaged, and challenged.¹⁴ Here are areas of the trauma-informed care movement that can shape and guide educational practices that support students experiencing trauma.

Take care of yourself first.

“But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength; they will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint” (Isaiah 40:31).

Starting with my very first teaching assignment, I bought into the myth, the legend, that teaching was my superpower; that real heroes weren’t those who wore capes but were those who taught. I believed that, for the sake of my children and their families, I must do more, sacrifice more, give more, achieve more—all without complaint—because I was making a difference. I was saving the world. I had limitless energy, immense compassion, and a hug and a bandage that could heal all wounds. My motto was “Don’t give up or in. Just do and be more.”¹⁵

But there comes a time when the energy runs dry, the answers don’t come as easily—or at all—and you can’t figure out how to help students grasp the concept of decomposing numbers, let alone how to help them become resilient in the face of tragedy.

Because I’ve heard it so often, I can rattle off commercial flight attendants’ pre-takeoff spiel like a pro: “In the event of a decrease in cabin pressure, oxygen masks will drop down. Please secure your own mask first, and **then** aid those in need of assistance.” The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) knows if you can’t breathe, you’ll be useless to others. If you’re fighting for oxygen, you’ll jeopardize your own safety as well as the safety of those depending on you. How useful will you be to your students and colleagues if you’re worn down and in a constant state of stress? Find ways to connect with Christ each day, to get enough rest and exercise, to eat well, to enjoy hobbies, and to take moments each day to simply exhale.

Create a safe environment.

As educators and educational leaders, it is our responsibility to create an atmosphere that communicates that our schools are safe places, that they are welcoming, accepting, secure,¹⁶ and filled with the love of Christ. Teachers can help

Types of Trauma Exposure

Trauma exposure can come in many forms:*

- Severe physical or emotional abuse;
- Sexual abuse;
- Severe emotional or physical neglect;
- Living in a household impacted by the incarceration of a parent or family member, or with a household member who is mentally ill or a substance abuser;
- Living in a home impacted by domestic violence;
- Parental separation/divorce;
- Bullying;
- Witnessing violence;
- Being threatened with violence;
- Loss of a loved one;
- Living through a natural disaster, pandemic, or national/worldwide traumatic event.

*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2019): <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/features/prevent-child-abuse/index.html>.

students feel safe by creating consistent schedules and routines, minimizing the number of transitions throughout the day and, whenever possible, telling students in advance about any upcoming changes in their schedule.¹⁷ Routine is an important source of comfort for children in riding out the emotional turmoil connected with the aftermath of trauma.¹⁸ Educators should also consistently communicate to students that it is their job as teachers and educational administrators to plan and implement procedures that will keep them safe throughout the day, and that they can be counted on as a consistent source of comfort and safety.¹⁹

Foster communication and dialogue.

Just because children are not talking about a tragic event does not mean they are not thinking about it. Without factual information, children may speculate to try to explain or make sense of the trauma. Unfortunately, in many cases, the conjectured fears and fantasies are much more frightening than the truth itself.²⁰

Never underestimate the difference you can make by genuinely inquiring about children's wellbeing by asking questions such as these: "How do you feel about what's going on?" or "What do your friends think about what is happening?" Asking questions will help you understand the child's perception about the trauma and can provide you an opportunity to correct misconceptions and provide reassurance. Be sure to share facts in age-appropriate ways using simple, clear, and direct words in a caring way. For example, you can reassure your students about the safety precautions that you are putting into place.²¹ Also, listen intently without

judging or minimizing what the child is saying. By listening calmly, even to concerns which might seem unrealistic, you communicate that their fears are not too frightening to handle.²² When appropriate, help children put their emotions into words. Also facilitate peer-to-peer communication through group discussions focused on a given topic or a book.

Identify what the behavior may be telling you.

It will be important to separate the behavior from the child and to intentionally observe and analyze what specific behaviors mean. Teachers should stay alert for the fight, flight, or freeze behaviors that children display when they are impacted by trauma, and work to reduce any triggering experiences in the classroom. Young children may find it particularly hard to adjust to change and loss. They have incompletely developed coping skills, so they must depend on the caregivers in their lives to help them through difficult times. They may regress to an earlier behavioral stage after a traumatic event such as thumb-sucking or bedwetting, or become afraid of strangers, animals, darkness, or "monsters." They may cling to a parent or teacher or become very attached to a place where they feel safe.

Changes in eating and sleeping habits are common, as are unexplainable aches and pains. Other symptoms to watch for are disobedience, hyperactivity, speech difficulties, and aggressive or withdrawn behavior. Children suffering from trauma may also withdraw from playgroups and friends, compete more for the attention of parents, fear going to school, feel unable to function academically, become aggressive, or find it hard to concentrate.²³

As soon as educators consider behavior as a form of communication, a new reality emerges. Students who refuse to do schoolwork are often classified as "disrespectful" or "disobedient," but this may be a hint that they feel unable to communicate their inability to cope with the trauma. This inability may be expressed by feelings of inadequacy, fear of failure, an overwhelming sense of overload, or demonstrated by struggles with negative thoughts and internal voices, or the need to take frequent breaks.²⁴

Empower your students through voice and choice.

Recognizing your students' areas of strength is a powerful way to combat the negative thinking that may often be associated with trauma.²⁵ When a student thinks negatively, the negative moments tend to outweigh the positive moments. Educators need to counter this effect with positive experiences by asking daily, "Did the student have the opportunity to feel competent today?"²⁶ Ways to help students feel empowered include providing many opportunities for them to make choices, as children who have experienced a traumatic event often feel as if they lack control over their lives. Provide safe ways for students to exercise choice and control within various activities and within their environment (i.e., choice of seats, choice of a book to read, etc.).²⁷ Additionally, providing students an opportunity to take action and to be a part of the solution may prove help-

ful. For example, students could be provided the opportunity to work at a food distribution center or make care packages.²⁸

We may never fully understand what our students are experiencing or how they are processing the events around them. However, if we continue to respond with love and compassion, we will be better positioned to partner with families to ensure that every child knows, believes, and experiences God's care and protection. As we grasp God's hand and the hands of our students, we can face whatever tragedy may come, united together for our common good. ✍

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