How Trauma is Changing Children’s Brains

BY MARY ELLEN FLANNERY

For several years, John Snelgrove began his workweek with a lengthy fax from the local police, listing the home addresses where officers had answered domestic violence calls over the
weekend.

Snelgrove, head of guidance services for Brockton (Mass.) Public Schools, would check those addresses against the district’s student database. When a match came up, he’d alert the counselor at that child’s school, who, in turn, would take a red envelope and deliver it to the child’s teacher. Inside was a slip of paper with a student’s name and a quick prescription for “TLC.”

A Sunday night, disrupted by violence, panic, and 911 calls, surely will make it difficult for a child to settle down to learn on Monday morning. But, even more than that, researchers have found that exposure to unrelenting stress and repeated traumas can change a child’s brain, making it easier to “fight or flee” from perceived dangers and harder to focus and learn. Understanding this neuroscience makes it possible for educators to create trauma-sensitive classroom.

“It’s more than one or two children in your class of 28, it could be closer to 30 percent or more,” Snelgrove tells his colleagues. But even children who haven’t experienced trauma will benefit from the strategies that Brockton teachers and education support professionals have learned through years of training with the Massachusetts-based Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, and their partnerships with local police, mental health, and child welfare agencies.

“Be consistent, be kind, focus on connecting with kids,” he urges.

The Traumatized Brain

Back in the 1990s, Dr. Vincent Felitti, working with very obese adults, discovered that a shocking majority of his patients had suffered significant traumas during childhood. Eventually, his work led to a mega-study, involving tens of thousands of patients, which showed the long-lasting effects of “adverse childhood experiences,” or ACEs, such as child neglect or abuse, or a parent with addiction or imprisoned. Those children often grow
up to be adults who are more likely to be sick, to be violent, to miss work, and to marry often.

Since then, it's become clear that the damaging effects of trauma are not saved until adulthood. It starts early and it affects students and teachers: in fact, kindergartners who have had tough experiences score below-average in reading and math, even when other factors like household income and parental education are considered, a study published this year found. Those traumatized 5-year-olds also are three times more likely to have problems with paying attention, and two times more likely to show aggression.

What neuropsychologists have found is that traumatic experiences actually can alter children's brains. In times of great stress, or trauma, the brain activates its deeply instinctive, “fight, flight, or freeze” responses, while dialing down the areas of the brain where learning, especially around language, takes place. When this happens over and again, especially in children under age 5, the brain is fundamentally changed. Basically, it adapts for survival under the worst conditions.

“It's an appropriate adaptation to their circumstances,” says Amanda Moreno (http://www.erikson.edu/about/directory/amanda-moreno/), professor of early-child development at the Erikson Institute in Chicago. “But it comes at enormous cost to schooling, especially with the way we do schooling in this country, which is very standardized.”

Veteran Illinois special education teacher Kathi Ritchie knows what this looks like in a classroom: “You will see kids struggling with all areas of language, word retrieval, writing... memory suffers hugely. They tend to be forgetful. They don't remember content-area ideas that have been taught to them; the next day it's like they never were taught,” she says. “The other thing that is huge is the behavior.”

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**Traumatized 5-year-olds are three times more likely to have problems with paying attention, and two times more likely to show aggression.**
Living in a constant, fear-activated state of hyper-awareness means these children can be quick to rage, Ritchie has seen. In their subconscious efforts to self-protect, they often can be perceived as defiant, disrespectful or overly aggressive. Others may look like they’re zoning out or drifting off, she says. “It can look like kids are shutting down, but their brain is telling them, ‘you need to be safe.’”

**Calming Colors, Safe Spaces, Mindfulness**

So what’s an educator to do? First, here’s what not to do:
Punish a child for showing the symptoms of a medical disorder. Trauma and stressor disorders can be found in the most up-to-date Bible of mental health disorders and diagnoses, the *DSM-V*, which means they are a real medical issue. Out-of-school suspensions are an inappropriate response and likely feed the school-to-prison pipeline.

Instead, what helps is to create a trauma-sensitive classroom where kids can feel safe and build resilience. Although Snelgrove no longer receives faxes from the local police because of revised confidentiality requirements, he hopes the “universal precautions” that Brockton teachers and education support professionals have embraced will catch any student who has experienced trauma.

Trauma-sensitive teachers often offer a “comfort zone” to their students, a safe space where kids can retreat and calm down. Sometimes it’s as simple as a beanbag chair. Their classrooms also are neat and uncluttered. Think about how you feel coming home to a messy house, Snelgrove says. A little
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– Kathi Ritchie, special education teacher.
“We’re not perfect, and I know we have a way to go, but when we talk about the ‘whole child,’ we mean it.”

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naLinda Faye Dean McMasters · 6 months ago

I am so glad to see a small list of WHAT TO DO.

Cool colors? I can do that.
Greet each student? I can do that.
Brain breaks? I can do that.
Bean bag chair? I can do that.

Other things that I suspect have therapeutic & calming qualities: painting, coloring, hand writing practice, music, singing/chanting/poetry, plants, dimmed lights...

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Kathy Gmerek Hastings → naLinda Faye Dean McMasters · 5 months ago

I love your easy response!

^ · Reply · Share

Tom Lenz · 6 months ago

The Illinois Education Association helped found the Partnership for Resilience which is creating trauma sensitive schools in Illinois. You can learn more at: http://partnership4resilience.....

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Margaret Codina · 5 months ago

The problem, as I see it, is that an overwhelming majority of traumatized children come from low-income homes. In Phoenix, where I live and teach, schools are shamefully segregated. I work in a 100% Title 1 school where 99% of the students are racial minorities. My neighborhood school is 95% White and 4% free lunch. We are creating a perpetual underclass, since even the kids at my school who are not traumatized have their learning impeded by the constant disruption from trauma-injured students. We need to return to an integration model, which research has shown is the most effective way to reduce the achievement gap, and we need to enact social policies to ensure that anyone willing to work 40 hours per week will no longer live in abject poverty.

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HBD · 5 months ago

My students were 2-3 years old during the Great Recession in 2008. This school year was the most challenging I've ever had, with a myriad of social and academic challenges. It's been my hypothesis that part of the reason it's been such a tough group to teach was because of the possibility of turmoil...