Creating Trauma-Informed Learning Environments

Trauma can negatively affect student learning at school by decreasing students' ability to pay attention, to regulate emotion and behavior, or to develop positive relationships with adults and peers (Felitti et al., 1998; van der Kolk, 2005; Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). Research shows that 45 percent of all children in the United States have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, such as parental divorce, death, or incarceration; mental illness, substance abuse, or domestic violence in their household; being a victim of violence or witnessing violence in their community; or experiencing economic hardship (Sacks, Murphey, & Moore, 2014).

That percentage is likely based on an undercount of students who have experienced trauma because research often doesn't account for the impacts of racism, bullying, losing a parent to deportation, involvement with the foster care system, homelessness, living in an unsafe neighborhood, human trafficking, natural disasters, war, terrorism, and political violence. Either way, the scope of the issue is such that most teachers are bound to witness the effects of trauma in their classroom and other school settings.

Many students who have experienced trauma view the world as a perilous place and are prone to fear. In any given circumstance, that fear, whether based on real or imagined danger, can trigger their central nervous system, prompting fight, flight, or freeze survival responses. These automatic responses, which are not under a student's control, result in the student being less able to engage in problem-solving, rational thought, focused attention, or self-regulation of emotion or behavior (SAMHSA, 2014). The student may also be unable to verbalize the cause of the fear that has prompted the reaction. Students with a history of trauma may overly focus on the negative aspects of their lives and may misinterpret other people's intentions. They frequently imagine incorrectly that others are intending to criticize, tease, or harm them. For example, they may assume that the student across the playground who is

laughing with a peer is actually making fun of them, or that a new parent volunteer in the classroom is a threat to their safety. Anxiety and avoidance behaviors are common; teachers may notice students affected by trauma daydreaming or regularly getting up to sharpen their pencils in order to avoid focusing on a class activity or assignment.

Examples of students' fight, flight, or freeze behavior in the classroom

FIGHT Responses

yelling or screaming, cursing, arguing, threatening, destroying property, hurting others physically, angry outbursts, irritability, difficulty staying calm, reactive emotionally, aggression

FLIGHT Responses

running away, refusing to participate, covering face with hat/hoodie, hiding behind furniture or under tables

FREEZE Responses

withdrawing, daydreaming, restricted movement, apathy, difficulty focusing, memory problems, prone to self-injury or repetitive behaviors, sleepiness

What can educators do to support students with trauma in their history?

Trauma-sensitive learning environments are designed with the understanding that every group of students will have at least one child affected by trauma. Teachers in these classrooms:

Understand the critical role they can play in reducing the negative effects of trauma for students by creating trusting, caring, and responsive relationships with students. Research consistently shows that the most important intervention for children affected by trauma is a safe, caring, and consistent adult who can buffer their experience of stress and communicate messages of empathy and optimism to support healing and resilience (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012).

Create safe and predictable environments. Teachers help students to feel safe by creating consistent schedules and predictable classroom routines, minimizing the number of transitions throughout the day and, whenever possible, telling students in advance about any upcoming changes in their schedule.

Use inquiry to identify patterns of behavior and possible triggers in the classroom that activate a student's stress-response system, such as sudden loud noise or unknown adults entering classroom. Teachers stay alert for fight, flight, or freeze behaviors that children display when their stress-response system is activated, and work to reduce any triggering experiences in the classroom. They consistently communicate to students that it is their job as a teacher to keep children safe throughout the day and they can be counted on as a consistent source of comfort and safety.

Use positive behavior supports and social-emotional learning strategies to support students to strengthen their self-regulation, social competence, and self-esteem. Teachers become well informed about the referral procedures and resources available through the school district and community in case they need to refer a student for additional mental health or other resources.

Engage in self-care so they can maintain the energy needed to be a calm, supportive, and healing presence for students. Because working with students affected by trauma can be emotionally and physically draining, teachers develop plans to support their own emotional and physical well-being.

References

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