Reaching and Teaching Stressed and Anxious Learners in Grades 4–8

Strategies for Relieving Distress and Trauma in Schools and Classrooms

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Introduction

Children Haven't Changed; Childhood Has

Teachers across America are confronted daily with student behaviors they rarely encountered 15 or 20 years ago. We may have had one, possibly two, troubled and troublesome youngsters per class, but when half, or more, of a classroom contributes to repeated disruptions, our energy and patience are exhausted.

One can hear it in the teachers' lounge and read it in print: teachers are burning out and leaving the field.

While we may agree that student behaviors are distressing, insights into why this increase is occurring are numerous and vary depending on the source. Sociologists, mental health professionals, child developmentalists, and criminologists offer differing explanations. Even politicians are attempting to declare causes and create legislation to control the behaviors.

One truth is certain: no one can offer real solutions until the root causes are clarified. Furthermore, reacting to the symptoms will not generate lasting resolutions and improvements.

Societal changes that have profoundly affected childhood experiences for America's children have filtered into families and neighborhoods over the last two decades while we, the adults, were busily tending to our own children, family, and career. As we steadily developed adult coping skills, it was natural not to look back at the societal changes we had accommodated and learned to cope with.

However, the impact of these shifts on young children's sense of security and sense of connectedness significantly correlates with the behavioral changes that have so distressingly altered our roles and careers as educators. Consider the following societal changes over the past 20 years:

- Frequent images of violent, horrifying events in television news, movies, and other electronic entertainment
- Terrorists attacks within our nation
- More and more two-career families and children under one year old with mothers in the work force
- Economic shifts that prompt multiple jobs or joblessness for families

- Increasing use of alcohol and drugs, particularly crack cocaine, which can dismantle maternal behaviors and care
- More family mobility, more separation from extended families, more grandparents raising grandchildren
- More-marked concentration and isolation of poverty in urban and some rural areas
- Increases in the number of children growing up with one parent absent and the economic challenges that brings
- Increases in child abuse and neglect
- Homelessness

For many youngsters, these societal changes have altered how they see their world and how they see themselves in that world. Children growing up amid these many changes will certainly present different needs and respond to school personnel very differently from previous generations, who grew up when experiences were more predictable. Collectively these numerous changes have contributed to many, many children's deduction that adults can no longer guarantee total safety, an absolute and universal developmental requirement.

Assuredly, none of us would allow ourselves to look directly into the eyes of a youngster we care about and say, "I can assure you nothing bad is ever going to happen to you!" This reality has changed our relations with children today, whether we realize it or not. A valued and essential portion of our traditional role as adults used to be keeping children, our own and all others, safe.

Consequently, many youngsters are making adaptations, albeit maladaptations, in order to survive in an insecure world (Garbarino, 1995). It is these developmental adaptations that are generating many of the stress-driven behaviors educators encounter today. Acknowledging this correlation does not imply these behaviors are acceptable or appropriate. It does mean that if the field of education wants to reduce or eliminate them, we need to understand the root causes.

The incredible advances in electronic imaging in the past decade illuminate our understanding of the intricate timeline of brain development. For example, the research by Allan N. Schore (Solomon & Siegel, 2003) on the prefrontal cortex indicates a surge of development between eight and 12 weeks after birth. At this time the infant has the visual acuity to clearly see the facial expressions of a prime caregiver. As the caregiver mirrors and mimics the infant's facial expressions, which are often more like contortions, as they lock eyes, the adult is stimulating the infant's neural development in the prefrontal cortex during the process referred to as attachment.

The key significance of this early, early relationship experience is that the prefrontal cortex is the scaffolding on which infants build their lifetime capacity for self-regulation, for stress management, and for dealing with rapidly changing environments. The vital emotion of empathy will emanate eventually from this same area of the brain.

All of these developmental capacities are directly implicated in the student behaviors educators find most distressing and frustrating, yet the root causes began long, long before the children ever entered a school. The societal changes affecting this process of attachment point to two early relationship issues: mothers returning to the workforce soon after birth of a child and drug use interfering with the attachment process. Children have absolutely no control over these circumstances, yet their neurological circuitry bears the imprint.

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Sometimes it helps to remember this remote trail of circumstances when confronted with students' belligerence and volatility. They are operating out of their prewired neurobiology. This insight does not imply the behavior should be condoned, but it does give an educator an alternative to taking it personally, a major cause of teacher burnout.

This book presents and applies valuable insights from the field of neurobiology, and readers will find neurological terminology that is not generally used in educational literature. For this reason, a glossary is included.

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The Impact of Losses and Stress on the Student's Mind and Body

It may seem to be an irony that in a wealthy nation, many children are confronted with loss; compounding the irony, children face losses that adults seemingly navigate with ease. However, significant losses are cumulative and can change a child's understanding of self and even alter brain development.

LOSSES

In every classroom there are students who have experienced grievous losses within their immediate circumstances. For some, these losses have been multiple; for some, they have been sudden and shocking. Understandably, shocking losses mean the family is also in crisis, and the grieving adult(s) may not be able to fully attend to their hurting 9- to 14-year-old.

James Fogarty tells us, in his book *The Magical Thoughts of Grieving Children* (2000), that youngsters in concrete operations (ages 7 to 11) are still able to engage in magical thinking, much as they did as preschoolers. Generating explanations that help youngsters understand something over which they have had no control brings them temporary relief. Magical thinking is a natural way of coping with the realization that one was helpless and couldn't bring about a more desirable ending.

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As students developmentally move out of concrete operations, they become painfully aware of deeper understandings of injustices and unfulfilled needs in their lives. Among the experiences that now need processing and integration might be the death of their parents' marriage, or divorce (Fogarty), and the fact that one of their parents has chosen *not* to participate in their young life—losses often assumed to have been left behind.

However, when children languish in "if only . . ." thinking and assume accountability for a tragic incident in order to shield themselves from a sense of helplessness, they are *not* processing their grief. When unresolved losses collide with prepubescent hormones, that unresolved grief can explode into anger and rage. Aggressive or acting-out behaviors generally follow.

Fogarty demonstrated that anger is not a primary feeling but an umbrella or cover for the following feelings of despair and fear resulting from those unresolved losses:

1. The sense of abandonment, resulting from such events as divorce, parents in prison, placement in foster care or with a grandparent, adoption, or one parent's choosing not to parent
2. The sense of betrayal, resulting from having been treated as invisible or given explanations one now recognizes as less than the total truth
3. The sense of helplessness, resulting from witnessing domestic violence or realizing one was powerless to prevent or stop a loss or tragic situation
4. The sense of shame, the result of perceiving that the grievous loss or unfulfilled needs mean one was unlovable
5. The sense of hopelessness, resulting from feelings that nothing will ever change or get better
6. The sense of disappointment, from grief over promises not kept and assurances not fulfilled
7. Sadness or depression, a blend of all of the above, resulting in no desire to continue

While these feelings emerge out of perceptions or interpretations, not realities, the feelings are very real to youngsters and ultimately drive their behaviors, that is, until the feelings are transformed, as described in Chapter 2. The inappropriate behaviors cannot be resolved until the children have had an opportunity to symbolically process and integrate their loss.

Young people of previous generations certainly experienced grievous losses and yet presented less volatile behaviors. It is natural to ponder why today's children can't just "suck it up" and "get over it," as the vernacular of earlier times might put it. Instead, we need to realize that we are in a society in which the cumulative changes in childhood collide with circumstances (such as parents' divorce) to exacerbate a child's affect and acting-out behaviors.

The challenge for the field of education and the community is whether to continue to react to the symptoms or instead to respond to the causes.

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STRESS

The relationship issues outlined in the Introduction, stemming from attachment trauma, can overly sensitize youngsters to stress and result in stress pileups (Allen, 2001). When traumas collide with current stress, a student's underdeveloped prefrontal cortex may not be able to maintain a state of self-regulation. The student is then propelled into an unbearably painful emotional state of anxiety. Such stress pileup can generate the destructive actions of aggression, violence, and rage. It can also lead to self-destructive actions and depression. These are not simply moral issues or character flaws but the results of early relationship issues.

Experiencing abuse or neglect during infancy, as a toddler, or as a preschooler similarly affects the areas of the brain engaged in primal development at those stages. The neurobiological research by Bruce D. Perry reveals that young children living in persistently unpredictable and unsafe environments experience altered brain development for survival purposes. The midbrain and limbic systems of children who live with insecurity become hardwired for detecting threats to their well-being. Any real or perceived threat initiates an instant fight/flight/freeze reaction. Survival is a prime value, not a choice (Karr-Morse & Wiley, 1997). This built-in wiring of the alarm system will be operational in students in Grades 4–8 if no trauma transformation has been achieved.

Such traumatic memories of fear and helplessness are not cognitively available to the student; however, the behavioral reactions to threats and insecurities become real—to the student and to all others in the school setting.

WHEN TRAUMATIC MEMORIES ARE TRIGGERED

Very young children naturally dissociate, or numb out, when traumatic memories are triggered. Because such very early memories are body memories (Rothschild, 2000) rather than verbal memories, words and cognitive expressions are not possible for the traumatized child. The only way the youngster can express the triggered fear and insecurity is through actions, survival actions that appear to others as acting up and hyperactivity. The brain wiring resulting from very early childhood experiences of insecurity and unpredictability constitutes a developmental alteration in the brain, not what may be known as posttraumatic stress disorder. These brain changes become the tragic legacy of students who have had early childhood traumas.

However, with the onset of puberty, males make a dramatic shift from dissociation to aggression, or survival actions that appear to others as violent and assaultive. One explanation links this aggression to the anthropological male role of hunter and protector. This explanation does not address the current presentation of aggression in girls, however.

As with the issue of loss, the significant increases in volatile classroom behaviors reflect the combined effects of early stressful life experiences and living in a turbulent world. Witnessing domestic violence is particularly devastating and is now recognized as a major contributing factor in preadolescent rage (Bloom & Reichert, 1998). Young children cannot run away or leave the dwelling; neither can they predict when domestic violence might erupt. Consequently, they live in a constant state of helplessness, only to explode when threatened by anyone, often at school.

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