

Trauma-Sensitive Schools

Learning Communities
Transforming Children's Lives, K-5

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FOREWORD



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Introduction

My interest in understanding the relationship between violence and children's cognitive development began in the early 1980s when I was working as a reading teacher. I wanted to know why so many young, aggressive children, who did not meet the criteria for learning disabilities or developmental delay, were unable to read. The question led me to doctoral studies at the University of New Hampshire's Family Research Lab, where I completed a dissertation on the effects of violence on children's cognitive development. The results showed a relationship between exposure to family violence and deficits in children's language development, memory, attention, and locus of control. Concerns about the causal direction of the relationships tempered the power of these findings.

Disagreements about causality were still an issue in 1992 when I published the article "The Educational Needs of Children Living in Violence" in *Phi Delta Kappan* (Craig, 1992). Some argued that abuse and neglect caused the observed developmental anomalies (Money, 1982). Others favored the view that children with developmental disabilities were more difficult to nurture, thus increasing their risk of maltreatment (Martin, 1979).

Since then, the retrospective Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study (Felitti, Anda, Nordenberg, Williamson, Spitz, Edwards, & Marks, 1998) as well as research on children's neurological development (National Scientific Center on the Developing Child, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2012) have resolved these issues. There is no longer any doubt that violence and chronic exposure to toxic stress disrupt the process of normal child development (Perkins & Graham-Bermann, 2012). These experiences alter the architecture of children's brains in ways that threaten their ability to achieve academic and social competence. Left unattended, these can affect health and well-being not only of children, but adults as well (Karr-Morse & Wiley, 2012). But the news is not all bad. Brain development turns out to be a very dynamic process that retains a certain plasticity or capacity to adapt throughout the human life span. This ability to change offers hope that the effects of early trauma can be reversed later in life (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2009). With the right type of instruction and emotional

support, traumatized children can regain their ability to achieve academic and social mastery.

Regrettably, these new advances in neuroscience are not yet center stage in discussions of educational reform. Despite its availability since the 1990s, this research does not inform the nation's educational policies, nor is it discussed in educational journals or publications (Oehlberg, 2012). Very few school districts or teachers' colleges provide information about the effects of trauma on brain development, the implications for school achievement, and proven ways to compensate for the developmental problems trauma creates for young children.

POSSIBLE REASONS FOR THE DISCONNECT

One reason for this apparent disconnect may be what is referred to as the "silo effect," which occurs when institutional system components stay within their own area of specialization and fail to communicate with each other (Ensor, 1988). A good example of this in the field of education is the lack of contact and communication among curriculum specialists and assessment specialists, and K–5 teachers and middle school teachers.

In some cases the silo effect is so extreme that the inhabitants of one silo do not even see the other silos. The results are thwarted communication, wasted energy, and missed opportunities for information exchange and shared policy development. Good examples are when teachers fail to pass along accommodations or adaptive equipment children with disabilities may need to complete written assignments. Another example is when strategies that are effective in helping a child with low frustration tolerance remain calm in new or challenging situations are not communicated to other professionals working with the child.

The silo effect is a possible explanation for some of the failure of education reform efforts since the turn of the 21st century. With the passage of No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001), reform efforts focused on standards and test-based accountability (Zhao, 2014). *Race to the Top* promises systemic reform by raising standards and improving teacher effectiveness. While laudable, neither effort includes research or information developed outside the educational framework. Specifically, neither is influenced by the wealth of neuroscience research currently available on the developing brain and its effects on children's learning and behavior (Caine & Caine, 1990; Jensen, 2008; Willis, 2008). Nor do they address the readily available explanations of the relationship between childhood adversity, neural development, and academic achievement.

Trauma-Sensitive Schools: Learning Communities Transforming Children's Lives K–5 attempts to spark a dialogue between members of the educational and neuroscience silos. Equipped with the knowledge produced by a multidisciplinary approach, policymakers can view educational reform through a trauma-sensitive lens: one that recognizes the high cost of trauma, as well as the pervasiveness of its symptoms, and that promotes resiliency as an antidote to failure.

DESIGN OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1, *Trauma-Sensitive Schools: A Resource for School Improvement*, traces the history of the trauma-sensitive school movement. The assumptions of a trauma-sensitive approach are discussed, as well as the model's core components. Implications of the implementation of this approach for educational reform are reviewed.

Chapter 2, *Dealing with Student Trauma: A Missing Component of Educational Reform*, provides a review of the research that established a causal relationship between early childhood trauma and the subsequent pattern of developmental deficits that threatens children's academic and social success. The chapter explains how these occur as the result of changes in brain architecture caused by trauma and related attachment failures. It concludes with an introduction to the trauma-sensitive school movement, thought by many to be the best way to improve children's academic and social success.

Chapter 3, *The Neurology of Attachment: Caregiving Counts*, discusses the social nature of the brain, addressing how early experiences shape children's ability to form and sustain relationships. It explains how the attachment bond is the carrier of all development, responsible for children's self-definition and their perception of others. Readers are introduced to strategies to engage traumatized children, thereby avoiding painful cycles of reenactment or oppositional behavior. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how positive attachment relationships at school help children gain the courage they need to move beyond the paralyzing effects of early trauma.

Chapter 4, *Trauma's Effects on Children's Readiness to Learn*, provides a detailed explanation of the impact of early trauma on children's academic and social competence. Changes in brain organization and function are discussed in terms of how they affect the development of children's representational thought, language, memory, attention, and executive function. Recommendations about how to help children overcome these obstacles are provided.

Chapter 5, *Retooling the Teacher’s Role in Trauma-Sensitive Schools*, begins with a discussion of children’s neurodevelopment and instructional best practices. The benefits of differentiated instruction and dialogic teaching are reviewed, including the contribution each makes to children’s developing sense of efficacy and self-awareness. A system of tiered intervention is proposed as well as strategies teachers can use to create collaborative partnerships with students.

Chapter 6, *Nature’s Second Chance: Constructing a Reflective Brain*, introduces the reader to recommended instructional strategies that positively affect the development of the cortical areas of the brain. Emphasis is placed on practices that promote self-reflection, mindfulness, and systemic integration of new information. Each practice strengthens the neural pathways responsible for self-regulation, a fundamental area of concern in children with early trauma histories.

Chapter 7, *Recognizing the Emotional Work of Teachers*, explores the emotional toll of working with traumatized children and its possible relationship to teacher attrition. The need for training that informs teachers about the contagious nature of trauma is discussed as well as ways to promote teacher resilience.

Chapter 8, *Next Steps—Managing the Necessary Changes to School Policies and Practices*, provides an overview of steps to consider as schools adopt a trauma-sensitive approach. These include an awareness of the complexity of the proposed changes, as well as the resources required to sustain enthusiasm and support for the process. The role of district and local leadership is discussed, in addition to the need for progress monitoring and the evaluation of student outcomes.

CONCLUSION

While one book cannot resolve all of the issues related to trauma and learning, it can raise awareness of a problem that threatens the viability of a valued resource—America’s public schools. The path to true school reform requires educators to embrace the insights neuroscience provides into this troubling barrier to children’s academic and social competence. The goal of writing *Trauma-Sensitive Schools: Learning Communities Transforming Children’s Lives K–5* is to provide educators with guidance along the way.