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Introduction

My interest in understanding the relationships 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 mental retardation, 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*. 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, retrospective studies (Felitti et al., 1998) and research on children's neurological development (National Scientific Council 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 changes can put children on a trajectory of increasingly challenging behaviors and disengagement from school. Once they become teenagers, their victimization often continues at home, in the community, and at school. Coupled with the developmental challenges of adolescence, unresolved or ongoing trauma leaves teens without the resources they need to create purpose and meaning in their lives.

Trauma-Sensitive Schools for the Adolescent Years: Promoting Resiliency and Healing, Grades 6–12 offers teachers and administrators guidance in knowing how to recognize the symptoms of trauma. Using strategies that can be integrated into the daily lives of schools, practitioners are able to mitigate trauma's devastating consequences and offer hope to the students in their care.

The continued high prevalence of trauma in children's lives suggests that trauma is a common pathway to academic and social problems. Teachers need to recognize the symptoms of early trauma and know how to intervene in ways that mitigate its devastating consequences. *Trauma-Sensitive Schools for the Adolescent Years: Promoting Resiliency and Healing, Grades 6–12* provides readers with an overview of what they need to know about trauma, as well as strategies to create and sustain a trauma-sensitive environment.

THE ADOLESCENT BRAIN

Adolescence is a period of rapid neural development. It is a critical period for everyone, but particularly so for children with trauma histories. It is a time that lends itself well to repairing dysfunctional adaptations as a result of early stress. The brain is especially malleable during this period. Developmentally appropriate, supportive environments help adolescents benefit from this remarkably high level of neuroplasticity by strengthening the neural pathways connecting the reptilian brain to the cerebral cortex. This improved circuitry increases teenagers' capacity for self-regulation, executive functioning, and problem solving (Siegel, 2013a; Steinberg, 2014).

Unfortunately, pervasive misunderstanding of adolescent development and ill-informed policies aimed at punishing rather than repairing juvenile misbehaviors limit the advantages that could be derived from appropriately guiding youth's neural development during this critical period. Despite a growing body of research that challenges traditional assumptions about how to improve the academic and social mastery of failing teens, middle and secondary schools—especially those in urban areas—continue to view students' underperformance as an intentional disregard for learning and discipline. With little or no training in how to recognize or repair the effects of unresolved trauma on adolescent behavior, staff members attempt to increase interest and cooperation using a combination of high expectations, strictly enforced rules, and severe consequences for noncompliance. The results? A dropout rate approaching 50% in urban areas and an alarming “school-to-prison pipeline” that criminalizes behaviors such as talking back to a teacher or violating the school dress code (Heilzeg, 2009).

No amount of goodwill alone can resolve these issues. Improving adolescent academic achievement and social mastery requires a commitment to integrating knowledge of the effects of trauma on adolescent development into efforts at educational reform. Historically, this has not been the case. Neither No Child Left Behind (NCLB) nor Race to the Top includes research or information developed outside an educational framework. Neither is influenced by the wealth of neuroscience research that is available on the developing brain and its effects on learning and behavior (Caine & Caine, 1990; Jensen, 2008; Willis, 2007). As a result, readily available explanations

of the relationship between early adversity, neural development, and school success fail to have the impact they should on issues of school climate, discipline, or instructional best practices in secondary schools.

Trauma-Sensitive Schools for the Adolescent Years encourages readers to view future efforts at school improvement through a trauma-sensitive lens—a lens that will help school personnel understand what trauma is, recognize its detrimental effects on development, and appreciate the pervasiveness of its symptoms. Only then can educators and policymakers promote reforms that foster resiliency and make the necessary changes that will improve students' academic and social mastery.

DESIGN OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1, *Trauma-Sensitive Secondary Schools*, provides an overview of the history of the trauma-sensitive school movement and the role it plays in reversing the failure of recent zero-tolerance or exclusionary discipline policies. It suggests that trauma-sensitive secondary schools represent a new vision for promoting adolescent resilience. A detailed description of the assumptions and components of the trauma-sensitive school model is presented.

Chapter 2, *Addressing the Many Faces of Adolescent Trauma*, explores the prevalence of adolescent trauma and its effects on neurodevelopment. The traumatic effects of marginalization on adolescent functioning are presented, particularly in terms of minority populations. This chapter explains how participation in inclusive school communities can help teens overcome these difficulties.

Chapter 3, *Remodeling the Adolescent Brain for Adulthood*, describes the neurological changes that take place in adolescence, with an emphasis on those occurring in the cerebral cortex. How these changes affect adolescents' executive functioning, social cognition, and capacity for abstract thought is discussed, as well as the variations in performance that can occur as a result of trauma. Threats to successful remodeling are presented, including mental illness, social isolation, and suicidal ideation.

Chapter 4, *Re-Traumatization on the Streets*, sheds light on the prevalence of community violence in the lives of adolescents. Common types of adolescent victimization are identified with suggested trauma-informed responses that can be implemented in schools. The relationship between trauma and delinquency is explored, as well as how zero-tolerance discipline policies contribute to the problem. The chapter ends with a discussion of the high prevalence of substance abuse among teens with trauma histories, and the devastating effects it can have on them.

Chapter 5, *The Neurobiology of Interdependence*, discusses the effects of trauma on attachment and self-individuation. The role attachment plays in adolescent behavior and social interdependence is explored. Various models

of adult attachment are described, as well as the support that teens with trauma histories need to achieve secure attachments as adults.

Chapter 6, *The Teacher's Role in Trauma-Sensitive Schools*, begins with a discussion of adolescent neurodevelopment and instructional best practices. The benefits of differentiated instruction and dialogic teaching are reviewed, including the contributions each can make to teens' developing sense of self-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 7, *Trauma and Resilience*, targets directions schools can take to foster resilience among adolescents exposed to trauma. The need to establish a culture of connection is discussed, as well as strategies for promoting positive peer interactions and collective efficacy. Strategies schools can use to help teens develop optimism and take an active role in their own well-being are presented.

Chapter 8, *The Effects of Secondary Trauma on Teachers' Lives*, explores the emotional toll of working with traumatized teens and its possible relationship to teacher attrition. The need for training that informs teachers about the contagious nature of trauma is discussed in addition to ways of promoting teacher resilience.

Chapter 9, *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 evaluation of student outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Though one book cannot resolve all 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 adolescents' academic and social competence. The goal of writing *Trauma-Sensitive Schools for the Adolescent Years* is to provide educators with guidance along the way.