



Trauma and Academics: Playing Chess in a Hurricane

*The Heart of Learning
and Teaching:
Compassion, Resiliency,
and Academic Success*

Introduction

- Focusing on academics while struggling with trauma is like “trying to play chess in a hurricane” - Kenneth Fox, Mt. Vernon HS
- Young children, especially those with special needs are vulnerable population

Studies reveal that students dealing with trauma ...

- Are two-and-one-half times more likely to fail a grade
- Score lower on standardized tests
- Have more receptive & expressive language difficulties
- Are designated to special education more frequently
 - Delaney-Black et al., 2002; Sanger et al., 2000; Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001; Grevstad, 2007

Think about it...

Is it reasonable to expect students in these circumstances to concentrate on their schoolwork, to behave “normally” while transfixed in the glare of emotions so horrific that they are beyond words?

How can we work to do a better
job of recognizing students
struggling with trauma?

How does trauma affect learning?

- Difficulty forming relationships (i.e. trust)
- Regulating emotions
- Attention, organization, comprehension
- Trouble processing verbal/nonverbal and written academic information

How Trauma Affects Learning

- Hard to solve a problem from a different point of view, infer ideas from a text, participate in group work, or exhibit empathy for another
- Children tend to “act instead of plan”

How Trauma Affects Learning

- Trouble with classroom transitions
- Struggle to use language to relate to people
- Often confused with symptoms from ADHD and mood disorders (depression, bipolar disorder, etc.)

What role can we play to
support our students?

The Nature of Compassion

- **Compassion** is a feeling of deep empathy and respect for another who is stricken by misfortune with a the strong desire to do something about it
- **Compassion** is a prerequisite for fostering resiliency
- **Compassion** is at the heart of learning and teaching

Fostering Resiliency through Compassionate Teaching

Findings from current research on fostering resiliency

- Provide unconditional positive regard in a safe & caring environment
- Always empower, never disempower
- Have students who have built some resiliency to help themselves by helping others

Fostering Resiliency through Compassionate Teaching

Findings from current research on fostering resiliency

- Maintain high expectations, reasonable limits, and consistent routines
- Increase pro-social connections
- Effective & affective teaching

Feedback

- “I feel like I forget sometimes kids have to go through things they should not...I tend to put it on the disability when that is not always the case. I realized that making more effort to have conversations with the kids about their feelings rather than using time out is much more effective. I feel so much closer to some of the kids now.”

- Occupation Therapist, Kindergarten Classroom

Feedback

- “What I found most useful was the language to use when talking to kids about their behavior. Assuring them they will be safe and that I care about them no matter what, it really helped. I have used the phrase, “I see you are having a hard time with _____, let’s come up with some solutions, no matter what you choose, I care about you a lot. I’m really proud of you when you make the right choices.” - Kindergarten Classroom Aide

More information

- *The Heart of Learning and Teaching: Compassion, Resiliency, and Academic Success* by Ray Wolpov, Mona M. Johnson, Ron Hertel, & Susan O. Kincaid
- <http://www.k12.wa.us/compassionateschools/publications/TheHeartofLearningandTeaching.pdf>