

IMPLICATIONS OF TRAUMA FOR SCHOOL RESPONDER MODELS

The impact of trauma on judgment, decision-making, and emotional regulation processes can have significant implications for the types of behaviors that occur in school and may place students at risk for exclusionary discipline and juvenile justice involvement. Implementing a school responder model requires a trauma-informed approach that includes understanding trauma and its impact on learning and behavior, as well as how best to support students by connecting them with behavioral health services and supports.

WHAT IS TRAUMA?

A “frightening, dangerous, or violent event that poses a threat to a child’s life or bodily integrity”ⁱ

- Types of traumatic events include physical, sexual, or psychological abuse and neglect; family and community violence; the sudden or violent death of a loved one; and serious accidents or life-threatening illnesses

Many, but not all, students exposed to traumatic events and adversities experience symptoms of traumatic stress

Prevalance of Trauma in Students

19%

have experienced physical abuse

71%

have experienced physical assault

38%

have witnessed community violence

9%

have witnessed severe interpersonal violence between caregivers

6%

have experienced sexual assault^{ii iii}

SYMPTOMS OF TRAUMATIC STRESS

- Depression, anxiety, difficulties with behavioral or emotional regulation, peer and adult relationship problems, difficulty maintaining attention, academic problems, nightmares and other sleep-related problems, and changes in eating habits
 - Many of these behavioral manifestations of trauma are the same behaviors that place a student at risk for exclusionary discipline
- Some younger students may experience physical symptoms, such as stomachaches or headaches
- Some older students may engage in alcohol and drug use or other unhealthy behaviors in response to traumatic events



i. National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (n.d.). *About Child Trauma*. Retrieved July 11, 2019, from <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/about-child-trauma>
 ii. Finkelhor, D., Turner H. A., Ormrod, R., & Hamby, S. L. (2009). Violence, abuse, and crime exposure in a national sample of children and youth. *Pediatrics*, 124(5), 1411–1423. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2009-0467>
 iii. Zinzow, H. M., Ruggiero, K. J., Resnick, H., Hanson, R., Smith, D., Saunders, B., & Kilpatrick, D. (2009). Prevalence and mental health correlates of witnessed parental and community violence in a national sample of adolescents. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 50(4), 441-450. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2008.02004.x>

WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO?

Here are some tips for schools. To learn more about what schools can do to support students and create trauma-informed and trauma-sensitive environments to keep students with behavioral health conditions in school and out of the juvenile justice system, contact us at ncyoj@prainc.com.

An understanding of trauma can provide school professionals with a new perspective for explaining the challenging behaviors they observe.

Learning and gaining an understanding about trauma can help school personnel change the questions they ask to help explain student behavior, from “What’s wrong with this student?” to “What happened to this student?” That change in mindset can in turn help school personnel respond differently to challenging behaviors, shifting one’s approach from a punitive model to an accountability and support model.



Universal screening and assessment can identify those students who may have trauma histories or otherwise may have a mental health condition or substance use disorder.

Screening students using a validated instrument can help identify those in need, allowing the school to then refer and connect them with relevant services in the community.



Building relationships with the community can support the referral process for students.

School personnel with this level of connection to the community are also more aware of the significant strengths and resources that exist, and are prepared to be a more informed and supportive presence in students’ lives. Creating ingrained and consistent mechanisms for enhancing awareness and sensitivity to the challenges and pressures within a community is critical to school responder models.



Creating a cross-systems collaborative team can help the school to meet students’ behavioral health needs.

Mental health professionals, within the school and in the community, frequently (but not always) have training and experience in trauma-informed screening, assessment, and intervention. A hallmark of school responder models is the provision of training and professional development to all members of the collaborative team.



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