FEATURE

TRAUMA SENSITIVITY IN THE SCHOOL LIBRARY

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What do you fear? Is it spiders? Heights? Confined spaces? Close your eyes for just a moment and think about that fear. Can you feel the change in your breathing and your heart rate? Now, imagine that fear following you everywhere. Many of the learners we work with every day struggle with fear as a result of trauma.

**Trauma’s Effects on Learners**

Trauma is defined as “an exceptional experience in which powerful and dangerous events overwhelm a person’s capacity to cope” (Rice and Groves 2005). Trauma research conducted in the late 1990s by Dr. Robert Anda and Dr. Vincent Felitti revealed a strong correlation between adverse childhood experiences and mental and physical health as adults (Felitti et al. 1998). Three main types of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are described by Salvatore Terassi and Patricia Crain de Galarce (2017). They are abuse (physical, emotional, or sexual); neglect (emotional or physical); and household dysfunction (mental illness, incarcerated relative, mother treated violently, substance abuse, and divorce). Research indicates that there are more children affected by trauma than ever before. The National Survey of Children’s Health in 2012 found that nearly thirty-five million children in the United States have experienced at least one type of childhood trauma. In 2012 Dr. Chris Blodgett conducted an adverse childhood experiences study that confirmed the pervasiveness of ACEs. He found that forty-five percent of students had at least one ACE; twenty-two percent of students had multiple ACEs; and one in sixteen students had four or more ACEs (cited in Souers and Hall 2016).

Typically, when faced with a dangerous situation, people react with “fight, flight, or freeze” responses. In most learners, this alert lasts only for a short time and in the face of extreme danger. For learners dealing with ACEs, fear often becomes a chronic condition. This fear can manifest into struggles in academics, absenteeism, social challenges, and anxiety. This hyperarousal can, over time, produce neurobiological changes in the brain (Terrasi and de Galarce 2017). Learners may not be able to trust their environment nor the people in it and may have difficulties forming relationships, interpreting verbal and nonverbal cues, or understanding other people’s perspectives. Think about the following learners:

- Mary is a ten-year-old girl who has problems staying awake in class. At home, Mary is often awakened at night by the sounds of her mother screaming and pleading as she is being beaten by Mary’s stepfather.
- Joshua constantly gets in trouble for failing to complete and turn in his homework. At home, his father is always drunk, and his mother is going through chemotherapy for cancer. Josh consistently has to care for his younger brother and sister, making sure they are fed and finish their homework before he gets them to bed.
- Ashley finds it hard to concentrate in math class. Last night, while her mom was at work, her mom’s boyfriend forced himself on her again. He has repeatedly threatened to kill both Ashley and her mom if Ashley tells anyone.
- Daniel was sent to the principal’s office once again for fighting. He and his sister may be “taken away” from their dad because of physical abuse. Daniel is not sure where he will be sleeping tonight or if he will have to be separated from his sister.
In a classroom setting, a learner exhibiting a “flight” reaction may withdraw, flee the classroom, skip class, daydream, sleep, avoid others, hide or wander, or become disengaged. The “fight” response may manifest as acting out, aggressive behavior, acting silly, showing defiance, hyperactivity, arguing, or yelling. The “freeze” response may manifest as refusing to answer, exhibiting numbness, refusing to get needs met, having a blank look, or feeling unable to move or act (Souers and Hall 2016). We see these behaviors all the time in our school libraries and classrooms, but how often do we stop to think about the underlying cause of these behaviors?

More than half of learners enrolled in public schools have faced traumatic or adverse experiences. One in six learners struggles with complex trauma. Complex trauma is defined as “simultaneous or sequential occurrences of child maltreatment...that are chronic and begin in early childhood” (Cook et al. 2003). Research indicates that ACEs can have major effects on learners (Felitti et al. 1998). Children’s exposure to ACEs such as exposure to abuse (psychological, physical, or sexual) and/or negative conditions at home such as chronic mental illness, domestic violence, social abuse, and criminal behavior has been found to predict increased risks of smoking, obesity, depression, suicide, substance abuse, and sexually transmitted diseases. Research has also shown a correlation between the number of ACEs and the likelihood and severity of health problems as an adult (Terrasi and de Galarce 2017).

ACEs may have a negative effect on learning readiness. Learners show higher occurrences of low attendance, behavioral problems, and struggles with schoolwork when they have experienced one or more ACEs. Blodgett found that as learners’ ACEs scores rose (the number of ACEs experienced by the learner), the more likely the learner was to struggle in school. For example, a learner with one ACE is 1.5 times more likely than a learner with no ACEs to struggle with coursework. A learner with two ACEs is 2.5 times more likely to struggle, and a learner with 3 or more ACEs is 2.9 times more likely to struggle with coursework. Blodgett’s research suggests that the number of traumatic events affected learners even more than the severity of the events (Blodgett 2012).

How We Can Help

Safe Haven

The good news is that research shows that young people are resilient and that given the right environmental conditions and interventions, the symptoms associated with trauma may be reduced (Davidson and McEwen 2012). Research has suggested that when learners feel safe, welcomed, and included, they may be able to develop positive relationships and a better ability to control their emotions and behaviors (Doll, Zucker, and Brehm 2004). Resilient learners have positive relationships with educators who show that they care by mentoring, listening nonjudgmentally, and being fair.

Trauma-sensitive school libraries are ones that provide a safe haven for learners to thrive in this way. School libraries are in a unique position in the school setting to provide this sort of environment for learners. Because the school library serves all learners in the school, it is likely that a proportion of the learners with whom we interact have experienced trauma. We can develop long-term, supportive relationships...
with learners and create spaces in which they might find support, understanding, and healing.

Safety

Many traumatic experiences such as physical abuse or witnessing domestic violence threaten a child’s feeling of safety. It is important that our learners experience consistency and feel safe in the school library. We should strive to maintain a predictable environment, including carefully planned transitions, clear boundaries, and explicit behavioral expectations. Having established policies and procedures can help learners know what to expect each and every time they visit the library. School librarians can help ensure consistency by maintaining signage and location of materials in the library. Learners can feel comfort in knowing where to find the books and materials they enjoy. Give learners advance warning of transitions and changes in the schedule by posting schedules.

Be sensitive to environmental cues that may initiate a reaction in learners. For example, a student who has experienced trauma related to a fire may become upset during a fire drill. The student may benefit from knowing that the drill is coming or a review of procedures prior to the drill. Learners who have experienced trauma related to storm damage may not react well to weather warnings, tornado drills, or the threat of severe weather. Reassure learners that drills are important and that plans are in place to ensure that students are safe during inclement weather. Warn learners if you will be doing something out of the ordinary such as turning off the lights suddenly or making a sudden loud noise. Many learners look to the library to provide them with a quiet space. Having a reading area with comfortable seating, away from noise and distraction, may be especially comforting to learners needing a place to reflect and pull themselves together. It is comforting to know that such a place exists in the school library.

Trustworthiness

School librarians often build a rapport with learners that classroom teachers do not. Try to get to know your learners and their interests. Your knowing about their interests, habits, personalities, and even fears makes learners feel welcome and important in the library. Demonstrate to learners that you are an adult that they can depend on and trust. Many of these learners are very leery of forming trusting relationships with adults.

It is also important to be aware of the reactions of other learners and to information that the student may share with other learners. Help protect the student from the curiosity of his or her peers and protect classmates from the details that may surface about a child’s traumatic experience.

Be available to the student if the student wants to talk, but don’t try to force them to confide in you. If a problem arises when a learner is in the library, it is important to remain calm, follow the plan in place for that learner if there is one, and avoid power struggles.

Empowerment

Often, when a child experiences trauma, a loss of control or space is involved. As school librarians, we can emphasize the feeling of control and empowerment a student experiences in the library. Learners have choices in the school library—in the books they read and in the activities they do. Sometimes, just letting learners choose where they sit in the library can make them feel empowered. A feeling of empowerment can also come from something as seemingly simple as being able to choose to read a magazine instead of choosing a book.

Makerspaces in school libraries may allow young people to focus on creating. The learners have control over their creation and can make it what they want or need it to be. Making may allow them to channel negative feelings into a positive creation.

Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy is the use of books to help solve problems. Learners can read books to determine how others have approached an issue or conflict. Nola Kortner Aiex identified nine potential reasons for using bibliotherapy with learners:

(1) to develop an individual’s self-concept;
(2) to increase an individual’s understanding of human behavior or motivations;
(3) to foster an individual’s honest self-appraisal;
(4) to provide a way for a person to find interests outside of self;
(5) to relieve emotional or mental pressure;
(6) to show an individual that he or she is not the first or only person to encounter such a problem;
(7) to show an individual that there is more than one solution to a problem;
(8) to help a person discuss a problem more freely; and
(9) to help an individual plan a constructive course of action to solve a problem. (Aiex 1993, 2)

Bibliotherapy may help learners identify with a character in a story, experience a type of catharsis and release of emotion, or develop
insights to cope with their problems. Identifying with characters in stories may help young people recognize that they are not alone in their experiences.

Bibliotherapy also provides a layer of distance. Learners may not feel comfortable speaking about their own traumatic experiences, but they may feel comfortable talking with someone about how a character in a book might have felt.

In addition, bibliotherapy can contribute to the development of empathy in learners who have not experienced trauma. Maeve Visser Knoth, a school librarian, coined the term “advance bibliotherapy” as a way to “prepare children for emotional experiences before they occur” (2006).

Our Role

As school librarians, we are not trained or expected to deal with ACEs or childhood trauma alone. Inform school administration and school counselors about any concerns regarding learners. Your district may have specific policies for dealing with learners’ emotional issues. Be there for the student if he or she wants to talk, but don’t force the conversation. Chances are, we encounter learners every day who have faced childhood trauma and ACEs in their lives. With sensitivity and planning, we can help reduce some of the fear and stress they face and help them develop their resilience.

Where to Find More Info

For additional information about childhood trauma, ACEs, and trauma-sensitive classrooms, read Fostering Resilient Learners: Strategies for Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom (Souers and Hall 2016) or Resilient Classrooms: Creating Healthy Environments for Learning (Doll, Zucker, and Brehm 2004). Both books provide a great background on trauma and many valuable suggestions on developing trauma sensitivity.

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Works Cited:


Souers, Kristen, with Pete Hall. 2016. Fostering Resilient Learners: Strategies for Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.


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