

Schools as Healing Environments for Students from Adversity

ADOPTIVE AND FOSTER FAMILY COALITION OF NEW YORK
NOVEMBER 2022



Adverse Childhood Experiences

Students who have experienced adverse, hurtful childhood experiences are much more likely to struggle in school and avoid school than other children. Approximately a third of students in every classroom have experienced significant adversity such as:

- Physical and/or emotional neglect
- Physical, sexual or emotional abuse
- Domestic violence
- Stressful family relations (e.g. divorce, mental health, substance use, incarceration, poverty)
- Prenatal exposure to stress
- Loss of a family member
- Separation from their biological family
- Multiple caregivers and moves
- Institutional care (e.g. orphanage or group care)

These experiences can be traumatic and cause toxic stress which can result in:

- Externalized behavioral challenges (e.g. tantrums, work refusals, anger)
- Internalized behavioral challenges (e.g. withdrawn, disengaged, dissociating)
- Emotional dysregulation
- Developmental delays
- Attachment insecurities
- Pediatric post-traumatic stress
- Sleep disturbances
- Anxiety and/or depression

The adaptation of a student's brain to adversity also impacts their academic skills. Students may have:

- Learning differences
- Executive function impairments (e.g. planning, organizing, time management)
- Working memory deficits
- Impulsivity
- Inattention and lack of focus
- Sensory processing difficulties
- Over or under active emotional responses
- Challenges with social engagement
- Fear of failure and shame

Often students with a trauma history are identified with ADHD, emotional disturbance, or learning disabilities, while others may be thought of as defiant, unmotivated, disengaged, or not working up to their potential. These labels describe the student's observable behaviors which are symptoms of the underlying changes to their brain and body caused by toxic stress. To improve outward behaviors and school success, students need to heal from the inside out with the support of compassionate adults like you!

Students' Strength and Resilience

Students from adversity are incredibly resilient. They are strong, capable youth who have developed skills and strategies to ensure their safety and success. Students have strengths that may include being:

- Energetic
- Independent
- Instinctive and inventive
- Able to divide their attention
- Creative problem-solvers
- Determined, persistent, and passionate
- Leaders and guardians of justice
- Protective and careful

They are amazing students who seek connection and want nothing more than to be successful learners.

Schools Can Help Children Heal & Thrive

You have such an important role in children's lives. Schools can be healing environments for students from adversity. School administrators, teachers, and staff can promote the resilience of their students through the use of universally effective strategies that build on the strengths of educators and students.

Educator Perspective

- Being curious, listening, accepting, and empathic with the student
- Understanding that the student's behavior is a symptom of underlying brain differences that are the result of adaptations to toxic stress and trauma
- Treating the cause/reason of the behavior (rather than the observed behavior)
- Healing the student's brain and body rather than managing their outward behaviors

Trauma-Responsive Programming

- Incorporating stress tolerance/reduction activities throughout the school day (e.g. physical movement, mindfulness, breathing, music, hand-use activities)
- Meeting the sensory needs of the student
- Providing choices, whenever possible
- Providing consistent expectations and predictable routines
- Preparing the student for transitions
- Using logical and natural consequences instead of reward systems (e.g. sticker chart) and punishments (e.g. suspensions)
- Preventing the feelings of shame
- Encouraging positive peer relationships

Educator – Student Relationship

- Building a trusting relationship with the student
- Helping the student calm their emotions and behaviors (co-regulation)
- Ensuring the student feels safe (emotionally and physically free from the fear of harm or hurt)
- Identifying triggers for the student and then preventing or reducing the impact
- Being aware of your nonverbal communication (including vocal tone, facial expression, and body language) when interacting with the student
- Problem-solving collaboratively with the student

Administrative Considerations

- Ensuring students are placed in classes that are appropriate for their academic capacity
- Offering on-site mental health services
- Providing special education services or accommodations to students as needed
- Partnering with the student and the parent(s)
- Ensuring the well-being of faculty and staff (an emotionally healthy and regulated adult can help calm, regulate, and engage a student)

Please consult with the professionals at the Adoptive and Foster Family Coalition of New York regarding the assessment of a student's needs in relation to their history of trauma and toxic stress and to develop strategies to support the student's healing and success at school.

To Learn More:

- National Education Association <https://www.nea.org/professional-excellence/student-engagement/trauma-informed-schools>
- Harvard University's Center on the Developing Child <https://developingchild.harvard.edu/>
- Karyn Purvis Institute of Child Development, Trust-Based Relational Intervention for Classrooms <http://child.tcu.edu/tbri-for-teachers>
- New York State Trauma Informed Care Network <https://www.traumainformedny.org/Home>
- The National Child Traumatic Stress Network <https://www.nctsn.org/trauma-informed-care/creating-trauma-informed-systems/schools>
- The New York State Center for School Safety - <https://www.nyscfss.org/trauma-informed-schools>.

For a digital version of this information, resources and more please see AFFCNY.ORG/HEALING-IN-SCHOOL/ or scan:



AFFCNY.org | 888-804-3575 | AFFCNY.Network

NEW YORK CITY | 3114 Mermaid Avenue, 4th Floor | Brooklyn, NY, 11224 | 646-688-4321
HUDSON VALLEY | 108 Main Street, Suite 5 | New Paltz, NY, 12561 | 845-679-9900
LONG ISLAND | 21 Greene Avenue | Amityville, NY, 11701 | 631-598-1983
CENTRAL NEW YORK | 950 Danby Road, Suite 318 | Ithaca, NY, 14850 | 607-272-0034