
ASKING THE QUESTION THAT COUNTS:

Educators and Early Childhood Trauma

“It doesn’t matter who you are or where you come from. The ability to triumph begins with you,” Oprah Winfrey says, so long as you have the right support. And she has shown how true this is by how far she’s travelled from a youth marked by poverty and trauma. She was born in the rural South to a single teenage mom and molested during her childhood. She became pregnant at 14, and her son died when he was an infant. Yet she went on to become a media mogul who has used her star power to inspire millions.

Oprah believes “you should turn your wounds into wisdom.” And last year she appeared on *60 Minutes* to share her personal journey from tragedy to triumph. Together with Dr. Bruce Perry, a leading expert on the developing brain, she put a spotlight on early childhood trauma and explored a central question: What’s the difference between those who succeed in surmounting their early ordeals and those who fail?¹

“It boils down to something very simple: relationships.” The key is for children to have “positive

adults” in their lives who can “buffer the impact of negative events,” Perry said. And Oprah agreed as she recalled the teachers who provided the “love and sense of connection” she lacked. “I found my refuge in school,” she thankfully said, “and my place in school from teachers.” They gave her the feeling of “value” she needed to become an uncommon person.² And her experience matters because childhood trauma is an all-too-common problem.

THE HEAVY TOLL OF EARLY CHILDHOOD TRAUMA

Almost half of U.S. children — about 35 million — have suffered one or more types of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and our youngest children are at especially high risk. Over one quarter of all confirmed cases of child abuse and neglect involve children under age three, and victimization is most common for children under a year. Accidental injuries, such as drowning, falls, choking and poisoning, also occur most often among children ages five and younger.³ Many more live through natural disasters, witness violence in their communities, suffer a dramatic loss, discrimination and forced displacement or refugee status.⁴

Childhood trauma has reached epidemic proportions and it afflicts all racial, ethnic and economic groups. But its burden falls

heaviest on low-income children of color — much like Oprah long ago.⁵ Traumatized children are often raised in “chaotic environments,” she says. And they can go on to cause chaos in the classroom and in the community at large. They can also turn out okay, especially with help at the time when our brains are most easily shaped — infancy and early childhood.⁶ So, early educators can — and must — find ways to keep them from being caught in a downward spiral that leads to lifelong defeat.

ACEs make a devastating impact because developing brains are highly susceptible to toxic stress. This type of long-term, often hard-wired stress impairs how the brain works, crushes our will to survive and lessens our ability to learn. Teachers typically report that children from disrupted homes rate lower in both aptitude and IQ. They’re three times as likely to be expelled from school or become pregnant as teenagers and five times as likely to be poor.⁷

The more types of ACEs a child suffers, the higher their risk of chronic disease, mental illness and being a victim of violence. Undergoing four or more ACEs doubles the risk of heart disease and cancer, increases the likelihood of becoming an alcoholic by 700 percent and the risk of attempted suicide by 1200 percent.⁸ And some educators might also be on the brink of deep despair when they contend with troubled, young children who’ve experienced trauma. Helping youngsters like this is hard, especially in early childhood settings that must meet the needs of all children.

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Young children who’ve experienced toxic stress display a range of challenging behaviors that can take a toll on their teachers, too. These children are likely to frighten easily and suffer anxiety in unfamiliar situations. They may be clingy, difficult to soothe, aggressive or impulsive. They may have trouble sleeping or trying to fall asleep. They may also have nightmares, be prone to bedwetting, become withdrawn and tend to lose recently acquired skills.

THE CHALLENGE OF LEARNING ON HIGH ALERT

The behavioral signs of trauma “run the gamut,” an early educator named Patty explained. “We have kids who wet their pants. We have kids who hoard food. We have kids who want to be by themselves. We have kids who act out and throw temper tantrums from the least little kind of thing like trying to give them direction. It can even be an issue of it’s a certain color of shirt that someone has worn because maybe their perpetrator wore that shirt when they were attacked. So, some people think it might be typical behavior. But when you get down to the nitty gritty and start digging into that kind of stuff, the trauma, it’s not typical behavior. It’s not something a pill’s going to cure.”⁹ It’s a sign that the children live in a state of constant vigilance, much like PTSD, that leaves them little energy for developing, thinking and learning.¹⁰

It isn’t easy for educators to get through to children whose stress response systems are

Turning the Tide *for* Traumatized Children

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Common types of ACEs experienced by young children



- Accidental injuries: drowning, falls, choking and poisoning
- Natural disasters
- Violence/Dramatic loss
- Discrimination/Forced displacement

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Children who attend quality early learning programs are

75% less likely to...

- Drop out of high school
- Be arrested for violent crimes
- Become teen parents
- Be unemployed compared to their peers who did not attend preschool

In a quality early learning program, children...



Feel safe and secure



Build strong bonds with the early educator



Receive positive attention and guidance

Early educators who create caring environments can make a concrete difference in the lives of the young children they serve.



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on high alert. If a child thinks the world is out to get him and his parents can't keep him safe, the world becomes a very scary place, as an educator named Linda had come to see. "They will strike out first," she said. "So, they are aggressive as well like, 'I'm going to hurt you before you hurt me,' and 'I'm going to be on my guard all the time.' So, their first reaction to things might be kind of aggressive and make them push away to protect themselves from hurt."¹¹

Children who act like this aren't trying to cause their teachers stress. Yet sometimes teachers respond by seeing themselves as victims of the children's misbehavior. And many simply give up, according to a Delaware teacher who works in Wilmington's inner city. "We have heard our inner-city students referred to as 'those kids' who are going to end up in prison, or 'those kids' who can't learn or 'those kids' who don't have parents who care." With all the issues involved, "being an educator in one of our inner-city schools is difficult, challenging work," she explained. "Educators see firsthand the impact that deep poverty can have on children and families. Some of our children tell us about the gunshots they hear at night. They experience hunger, hopelessness and fear."¹²

EXPULSIONS THAT START THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL

Their behavior is often the first red flag of trauma, and it should lead educators to explore the cause. "The question they should be asking is not 'what's wrong with that child?' but 'what happened to that child?'" Perry told viewers of *60 Minutes*. But too often educators fail to ask the right question and mistake that red flag for bad behavior that needs "fixing."¹³

The result too often is the expulsion of pre-K children who don't seem to fit in. Across the nation, more than 5,000 pre-K children are expelled each year, predisposing them to numerous future risks, including school failure, teen pregnancy, unemployment and violence. In Illinois, for example, nearly three preschoolers are expelled for every thousand enrolled, a rate three times higher than that for K-12 students.¹⁴

Two-, three- and four-year-old children who are expelled from preschool are much more likely to be ill-prepared for elementary school and among those most at risk for school failure. Children who don't attend quality early learning programs are 25 percent more likely to drop out of high school, more likely to be arrested for violent crimes, more likely to become teen parents and less likely to be employed than peers who attended preschool.¹⁵ So, it's important to give traumatized children the tools to succeed — not expel them.

BONDS THAT BUILD RESILIENCE AND SELF-REGULATION

Early childhood educators must be proactive when they see young children with challenging behavior patterns, according to the Council for Professional Recognition, a Washington, DC, nonprofit that promotes improved performance and recognition of professionals in the care and education of children ages birth to five years old. "Challenging behavior in preschool is one of the strongest predictors of delinquency, drug abuse and antisocial behavior," the Council notes in *Essentials for Working with Young Children*.¹⁷

It can also lead to expulsions, the start of a long descent as we have seen. “Ideally, no child should ever be expelled from an early childhood setting,” the *Essentials* points out, “and early educators should prevent and handle challenging behaviors using positive child guidance techniques consistently. Treat children with respect and focus on their positive actions. Though challenging behaviors may test your patience and even anger you, never let your anger and frustration show. Be calm, objective and professional at all times. Your relationships with the children are your greatest aids. When early educators and young children have strong bonds, children have better interactions with their peers and are more eager for positive attention.”¹⁸

For a traumatized child to bounce back, they need at least one adult who gives them affection, a sense of belonging and support. That go-to person can be someone at their early childhood education program, as educators understand. “I truly think that most children need and benefit from an adult who’s really consistent and loving,” said an educator named Amanda, “and that person could even be the preschool teacher, the one consistency in their lives, especially if they get moved out of their home. Keeping children in the same preschool setting can easily make a big difference in helping them be more resilient.”¹⁹

The early childhood setting might be the only safe, secure place that some children experience all day. So, the key things are “to keep all your interactions as positive as you can, be as respectful to the child as you can and be as loving as you can,” said an educator named Joan. “When a child might not have access to that much love and respect at home, at least we know we

can give it to them in the classroom.”²⁰ And educators who create caring environments for children can make a concrete difference, especially if their preschools have the right assistance and guidance.

GIVING EFFECTIVE CARE WITH COMMUNITY SUPPORT

In Kansas City, for example, Crittenton Children’s Center, which serves a largely disadvantaged population, came together with the local Head Start to implement Head Start Trauma Smart (HSTS), a program that sent licensed therapists to train preschool administrators and teachers on ways to cut down on the stress of chronic trauma, foster age-appropriate development and build a trauma-informed culture. HSTS also provided intensive, individual, trauma-focused intervention for referred children and classroom consultation for all educators and children, along with peer-based mentors as a way for preschool staff to give each other support — all strategies that yielded strong results. Children who received services from HSTS showed significant improvement in academic performance, school readiness and the behaviors that could lead to expulsion.²¹

Positive results also came out of the twin efforts of Partnerships Program for Early Childhood Mental Health and Project LAUNCH, a community initiative to transform preschools in rural Appalachia, where poverty and limited resources put many children at risk for poor outcomes. The joint initiative sent trained consultants into preschools where they provided trauma-informed training for educators

TIPS FOR WORKING WITH TRAUMATIZED CHILDREN

There are many examples of people who triumph in life, despite facing adverse circumstances when young. And traumatized children can also bounce back if they receive sensitive, responsive early childhood education. Of course, there are no shortcuts for building trusting relationships and safe environments for children who've undergone trauma. But there are some basic guidelines educators should keep in mind to help traumatized children build self-regulation and resilience:



Remember that children who've been through trauma worry about what's going to happen next. A daily routine can be calming, so provide structure and predictability whenever you can. Besides explaining how the day will unfold, have signs or a storyboard that show which activity the group will do and when.



Put yourself in the child's shoes and try not to judge the trauma. Even the most caring teacher may instinctively feel that a situation isn't so bad, but it's how the child feels about the source of stress that matters most. Anything that activates our nervous system for more than four to six weeks constitutes post-traumatic stress.



Realize that you don't need to know exactly what caused the trauma to be able to help. Instead of focusing on the specifics of a stressful situation, concentrate on the support you can give. Stick with what you see — the hurt, anger and worry — instead of getting every detail of a child's story.



Help children feel they're good at something and can influence the world. Find opportunities for them to set and meet goals, so they'll enjoy a sense of achievement and control. Assign them jobs in the classroom that they can do well or let them help another child. Children who've been through trauma need to get their sense of self-worth through concrete tasks.



Help them build self-regulation because many traumatized children develop distracting behavior patterns and have trouble staying focused for long periods of time. Schedule regular brain breaks and tell the children at the start of the day when there will be breaks for free time, to play a game or stretch.



Ask children directly what you can do to help them make it through the day. They may ask to listen to music with headphones or put their head on their desk for a few minutes. If they don't respond, step back and ask them if there's something you can do to make them feel even a little bit better.

combined with trauma-specific mental health interventions delivered on site. And the assistance benefited both educators and children. The children showed greater resilience based on three traits, initiative, attachment and self-control. Meanwhile, educators reported feeling more competent and confident about their ability to cope with challenging behaviors in the classroom, change them and cut down on classroom stress.²²

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REFLECTIVE PRACTICE TO HELP TEACHERS RESPOND

Educators who work with traumatized children are already under pressure, as one Detroit preschool understands. At Starfish Family Services Center, which serves some of the city’s most disadvantaged families, educators sit down each month with a therapist for a group discussion that can lead to tears, frustration and, finally, a sense of clarity on a concern involving a child. The sessions use an approach called reflective practice that the mental health field has long employed to help therapists and clinicians as they process their feelings about troubling situations at work.²³

And teachers say that reflective practice has made a difference. “It makes us better

teachers because we’re not carrying it inside,” one educator explained. Another said, “There are a lot of killings and

shootings and things like that. There’s a lot of community violence, and there are a lot of kids who are very traumatized by things they see in their home environment.” Having a place to discuss all that makes it easier

to respond effectively to the disturbing behaviors she sees in her classroom.²⁴

Reflective practice also helped an educator at Visitacion Valley Therapeutic Nursery located in a San Francisco neighborhood ridden by violent crime. In the nursery’s first year, a four-year-old girl named Lulu lost her mother to cancer. Afterward, she seldom spoke and when she did mention her mother, an educator named Sue would respond by singing or changing the subject. Then one day in circle time, the children talked about parents missing because of jail, absence or death. And Lulu opened up at last. “My mother died,” she said. “The police took her away in an ambulance, and she never came back.” Afterward, Sue suggested a song, but a mental health professional on staff noticed that Sue was crying. It turned out that Sue’s mother had also recently died and later in reflective practice, Sue realized how hard she’d been trying to be strong for her family. She couldn’t guide Lulu through her grief when she hadn’t had time to mourn the loss of her own mom.²⁵

TURNING TRAGEDY INTO TRIUMPH

Educators like Sue can turn their wounds into wisdom and give traumatized children a needed sense of belonging and connection. They might not be able to prevent the bad stuff that happens to children. But they can take charge of how they respond to the children's distress. With the right strategies and support — with enough patience and love — our educators can help rescue children from defeat, put them on the path to productive lives and turn tragedy into triumph.

A child's ability to bounce back is "directly proportional to relationships," as Oprah knows. "Everybody growing up needs somebody who says, 'I believe in you, you're OK, things are going to be all right.'"²⁶ It might be a coach or somebody in Sunday school or a neighbor. It might also be someone who works in a preschool and cares enough to ask the question that counts: What happened to you? Educators like this may never get the thanks they deserve on *60 Minutes*. But we should put a spotlight on their struggles and their successes. They can play a starring role in children's lives.

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