

Trauma and Children's Ability to Learn and Develop

Dr. Katrina A. Korb

Department of Educational Foundations, University of Jos

katrina.korb@gmail.com

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Psychological trauma is an emotional response to a traumatic event. Traumatic events can include a single experience such as a severe automobile accident, repeated experiences such as repeated outbreaks of violence in the community, and witnessing another person's traumatic experience such as watching another person being beaten to death. These traumatic events overwhelm the individual's ability to cope with the thoughts and emotions associated with the experience.

Immediately after a traumatic event, shock and denial are typical responses. However, after the initial shock of the event passes, other psychological traumatic symptoms can continue. If the symptoms continue beyond three months, then the individual is at an increased risk for serious long-term negative consequences.

Physical trauma symptoms include the following:

- Headaches
- Nausea
- Increased heart rate
- Sweat
- Feeling restless
- Butterflies in stomach
- Lack of appetite
- Panic attacks
- Insomnia

Emotional trauma symptoms include the following:

- Unpredictable emotions
- Easily angered
- Anxiety
- Emotional detachment (numbness)
- Depression
- Despair
- Feelings of helplessness and hopelessness

Mental trauma symptoms include the following:

- Flashbacks of the traumatic event
- Nightmares
- Frightening images in the mind related to the traumatic event
- Difficulty thinking and concentrating
- Difficulty paying attention

Behavioral trauma symptoms include the following:

- Anti-social behavior
- Strained relationships
- Over-reacting to perceived dangerous situations
- Trying to avoid any situation, person, or place that resembles the traumatic event

There are very large individual differences in responses to trauma. Some individuals are affected by certain traumatic events while others are not. For example, one person might be

traumatized by being near to a bomb blast while another person may not. Some people struggle with psychological trauma symptoms longer than others. For example, one person may recover within days of the bomb blast, but another person may experience traumatic symptoms for weeks afterwards. Even after the symptoms have stopped, they may return when a trigger is experienced. For example, months after an armed robbery, the smell of gunfire may trigger memories and unstable emotions long after the person has not ordinarily experienced traumatic symptoms.

An individual person's responses to trauma will depend on multiple factors. First, the person's previous traumatic experiences will influence their reaction to a traumatic event. Those who have experienced prior traumatic events are more likely to have more severe psychological trauma than those who have not experienced prior traumatic events. Second, individual strengths and weaknesses in managing emotions will determine how a person responds to the traumatic event. Some people are better able to manage their emotions than others. Finally, support from friends and family plays a key role in how quickly a person can heal from a traumatic event. Trauma healing is often helpful to help individuals overcome the effects of psychological trauma.

Many people mistakenly believe that children are not influenced by traumatic events. They may believe that children under 5 years are too young to understand a traumatic event or that young children will soon forget the traumatic event, so it will not negatively impact them. However, adolescents, primary school children, nursery school children, and even infants and toddlers can experience psychological trauma similar to adults.

Over 20 years of research has shown that school-age children and adolescents experience all of the same traumatic symptoms as adults. Recent research shows that traumatic experiences affect the brains, minds, and behavior of young children and infants.

Traumatic experiences can result in a significant disruption in a child's or adolescent's development with serious long-term consequences. Traumatic events affect the child's brain and nervous system. They also increase the possibility of various conduct disorders. Because of the traumatic event, children will have difficulty paying attention and concentrating. Therefore, children exposed to traumatic events also have an increased risk of low academic performance or failure in school. A research study in the United States examined children exposed to violence between the ages of 2 and 8 years. Researchers found that children exposed to violence had lower-than-normal intellectual development, particularly those children who experienced traumatic events by the age of 2.

Children exposed to trauma also engage more in high-risk behaviors such as substance abuse, risky behaviors, or unhealthy sexual activity. These children also often respond with anti-social behavior, which creates difficulties in peer and family relationships. Finally, children exposed to trauma have increased risk of physical health problems such as heart disease and asthma. When children who are exposed to traumatic events become adults, they tend to have difficulty establishing fulfilling relationships, holding steady jobs, and becoming productive members of society.

Abraham Maslow proposed a hierarchy of needs (see Figure 1; Woolfolk, 2007). The most basic needs are at the bottom, and these needs must first be met before the person can move onto higher needs. According to Maslow, a person's physiological needs such as food, water, and air must first be met. Once these physiological needs are met, then a person can move to the next level of safety needs such as being safe from violence. Academic success belongs near the top of

the hierarchy, the need to know and understand. Therefore, if a child's safety needs are not met, it will be very difficult for them to succeed academically.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



Figure 1.

Developmental Levels and Trauma

Because children are negatively affected by trauma, it is important that teachers and parents have a good understanding of children's responses to trauma. Caregivers should also understand what they can do to help children recover from the traumatic event. Because children's responses to a traumatic event are influenced by their developmental level, the responses to traumatic events will be described below for each developmental period.

Adolescents affected by a traumatic event may respond in the following ways:

- Feel self-conscious about their emotional responses to the event
- Feel shame and guilt over the event
- Fear being viewed differently from their peers
- Withdraw from family and friends
- Express fantasies about revenge
- Radically change the way they think about the world
- Engage in self-destructive behaviors

Teachers and parents can help adolescents recover from a traumatic event by:

- Allowing the adolescent to discuss the event and their feelings about it
- Discussing what could have been done to prevent the event
- Discussing the expectable strain on relationships with family and peers, and offer support in these difficulties
- Helping them understand that rebellious behavior is likely an effort to voice anger about traumatic events
- Discussing the adolescents' thoughts of revenge and help them develop constructive alternatives

- Helping them recognize that others who also experienced the event (perhaps family members or friends) have different experiences and different emotional responses. Recognizing each others' experience of the event, and helping each other cope with possible feelings of fear, helplessness, anger, or even guilt in not being able to protect others from a traumatic experience, is an important component of a family's emotional recovery.

Primary school children affected by trauma may respond in the following ways:

- Continually feel concerned about their own safety and the safety of friends or family
- Constantly retell the traumatic event, or they may describe being overwhelmed by their feelings of fear or sadness
- Regress in their developmental level
- Have sleep disturbances, including difficulty falling asleep, fear of sleeping alone, or frequent nightmares
- Have difficulty concentrating and learning at school
- Complain of headaches and stomach aches without obvious cause
- Engage in unusually reckless or aggressive behavior

Teachers and parents can help primary school children recover by:

- Encouraging them to express their fears, sadness, worries, and anger in a supportive environment
- Acknowledging that their feelings are normal
- Correcting any distortions of the traumatic events that they express
- Communicating with parents and teachers when their thoughts and feelings are getting in the way of their concentrating and learning

Teachers and parents can help nursery school children recover by:

- Providing comfort, rest, and an opportunity to play or draw
- Providing reassurance that the traumatic event is over and that the child is safe
- Helping them verbalize their feelings so that they don't feel alone with their emotions
- Tolerate regression in developmental tasks for a period of time

Trauma Healing

To help a child heal from a traumatic experience, there are five key tips.

First, discuss the traumatic event with the child. Children do not benefit from being told to not think about it or putting it out of their minds. Indeed, the event will be constantly on the child's mind, so it is best to allow the child to discuss the event as needed. Let the child guide the discussion. If the child does not mention the event, do not bring it up on your own. However, when the child brings it up or seems to be thinking about it, do not avoid discussion. Listen to the child, answer their questions, and provide comfort and support. Listening and comforting a child will have long-lasting positive effects on the child's ability to cope with the traumatic event. Also, give the child age appropriate information regarding the trauma. The more the child knows about the event, the easier it is for them to make sense of it. In most cases, the child's fears and fantasies about the event are more frightening than the truth so it is better for the caregiver to

share the truth about the event. Unpredictability and uncertainty can make a traumatized child more anxious, fearful, and cause more serious psychological traumatic reactions. Tell the child the truth, even when it is emotionally difficult.

Second, be nurturing, comforting and affectionate toward the child. However, be careful with children traumatized by physical or sexual abuse because affection may inadvertently cause more trauma for the child. Therefore, be physically affectionate when the child seeks it.

Third, watch for the following signs of distress:

- Re-enactment of the event, such as in play and drawing
- Avoidance, such as being withdrawn, daydreaming, and avoiding other children
- Physiological hyper-reactivity, such as anxiety, sleep problems, and behavioral impulsivity

When you see these symptoms, it is likely that the child has been reminded of the event, either through thoughts or experiences. Therefore, try to comfort and be tolerant of the child's emotional and behavioral problems. Also observe patterns in the child's distressed behavior to try to identify what events trigger traumatic symptoms for the child.

Fourth, try to protect the child from other events that may trigger an emotional response. Stop activities that are upsetting or re-traumatizing for the child. If symptoms increase during a certain situation, avoid these activities. You may also restructure or limit activities that cause escalation of symptoms.

Finally, if you have questions, seek help. The more informed you are about psychological trauma and the more you understand the child, the better you can provide the support, nurturing and guidance they need to heal from the event.

Some children experience severe reactions to traumatic experiences. In this case, more advanced trauma healing may be necessary. Trauma healing for children may include:

- Teaching children stress management and relaxation skills
- Creating a coherent story of what happened
- Correcting untrue or distorted ideas about what happened and why
- Changing unhealthy and wrong views that have resulted from the trauma
- Involving parents in creating optimal recovery environments

While a traumatic event can have serious negative effects on a child, the event does not have to cripple the child for life. With appropriate support from teachers, parents, and other family, the child can heal from the traumatic event, and even grow more mature as a result.

Additional Resources

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: www.NCTSNet.org

Helping Traumatized Children: A Brief Overview for Caregivers:

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