



A Union of Professionals

VOL. 43, NO. 2 | SUMMER 2019  
www.aft.org/ae

# AMERICAN Educator

A QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH AND IDEAS

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# Supporting Students with Adverse Childhood Experiences

How Educators and Schools Can Help



BY DAVID MURPHEY AND VANESSA SACKS

**A**dverse childhood experiences (typically referred to as ACEs) are potentially traumatic experiences and events, ranging from abuse and neglect to parental incarceration.\* A growing body of research has made it increasingly apparent that ACEs are a critical public health issue that can have negative, lasting effects on health and well-being in childhood or later in life.<sup>1</sup> However, more important than exposure to any specific event of this type is the accumulation of multiple adversities during childhood, which is associated with especially deleterious effects on development.<sup>2</sup>

One mechanism responsible for the effects of ACEs—toxic levels of stress—can be substantially buffered by stable and supportive relationships with caregivers. Schools and educators can also play a critical role by promoting these kinds of

caring relationships, as well as social and emotional skills, that support healthy youth development for all students; removing exclusionary and punitive disciplinary practices; and supporting the physical and mental health needs of students.<sup>3</sup>

## Prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences

There is growing interest in understanding the prevalence of these adverse experiences across different communities in the United States, as well as their implications for families, schools, and other child-serving institutions. A recent Child Trends research brief, *The Prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences, Nationally, by State, and by Race/Ethnicity*, from which this article is drawn, used data from the 2016 National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) to estimate the prevalence of one or more selected adversities among children from birth through age 17, as reported by a parent or guardian. The study

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\*Some researchers limit the term “adverse childhood experiences” to the 10 items included in the original 1998 study that defined the term, while others use screening tools that have included a larger or smaller number of ACEs. Our work is primarily with the items included in the 2016 National Survey of Children's Health, which are similar, but not identical, to those in the original ACEs study. In this article, we use “ACEs,” “adverse childhood experiences,” and “childhood adversities” interchangeably.

team estimated the national and state-level prevalence of eight specific adversities: parental divorce or separation, death of a parent, parental incarceration, witnessing violence in the home, experiencing or witnessing violence in the neighborhood, economic hardship, living with individuals with substance use problems, and living with someone who is mentally ill. Our findings include:

- Among the adversities included in the survey, economic hardship and divorce or separation of parents or guardians are the most common adversities reported nationally and in all states.
- Just under half (45 percent) of children in the United States have experienced at least one adversity, which is similar to the rate of exposure found in a 2011–2012 survey.<sup>4</sup> At the national level, about 1 in 10 children have experienced three or more ACEs. In five states—Arizona, Arkansas, Montana, New Mexico, and Ohio—as many as 1 in 7 children have experienced three or more ACEs.
- Children of different races and ethnicities do not experience adversities equally. Nationally, 61 percent of black children and 51 percent of Hispanic children have experienced at least one adversity, compared with 40 percent of white children and only 23 percent of Asian children. In every region of the United States, the prevalence of adversities is lowest among Asian children, and in most regions, the prevalence is highest among black children.

While these results show the prevalence of some adverse childhood experiences, they likely underestimate the problem, since other notable childhood adversities, such as homelessness, forced migration, and bullying or harassment, were not included in the survey. However, no single assessment tool can capture all potentially traumatic experiences.

### Childhood Adversity, including ACEs, Can Have Profound Effects

Adversity can cause stress-laden reactions in children, including feelings of intense fear, terror, and helplessness. When activated repeatedly or over a prolonged period of time (especially in the absence of protective factors), toxic levels of stress hormones can interrupt normal physical and mental development and even change the brain's architecture. Childhood adversities have been linked to numerous negative outcomes in adulthood, and research has increasingly identified effects in childhood.<sup>5</sup> Negative outcomes include some of society's most intractable (and, in many cases, worsening) health issues: alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, suicide, poor physical health, and obesity. There is also some evidence that exposure to adversity is linked to lower educational attainment, unemployment, and poverty.<sup>6</sup> In childhood, children who have experienced multiple adversities are more likely to struggle in school and have emotional and behavioral challenges, including difficulties with paying attention and self-regulation.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, not all children who experience one of these adverse events (or even more than one) are negatively affected; much depends on the context in which they occur—particularly the context of positive relationships.

Research has found that the risk for negative outcomes increases with the number of adversities; in other words, chil-

dren who have experienced multiple adversities are substantially more likely to be negatively affected than children who have experienced only one.<sup>8</sup> A 1998 ACEs study found that adults who have experienced four or more ACEs have a particularly high risk for negative physical and mental health outcomes, including some of the leading causes of death in the United States.<sup>9</sup> Subsequent studies have identified lower thresholds, ranging from one to three ACEs, as the tipping point at which risk increases greatly.<sup>10</sup> Multiple factors likely account for individual variation in response to adversity, including contextual factors such as supportive adult relationships.

ACEs can have negative, lasting effects on health and well-being in childhood or later in life.



One of the most sobering findings regarding childhood adversities is preliminary evidence that their negative effects can be transmitted from one generation to the next.<sup>11</sup> Toxic stress experienced by women during pregnancy can negatively affect genetic “programming” during fetal development, which can contribute to a host of bad outcomes, sometimes much later in life.<sup>12</sup> Infants born to women who have experienced four or more childhood adversities are two to five times more likely to have poor physical and emotional health outcomes by 18 months, according to one recently published study.<sup>13</sup>

### Responses to Trauma

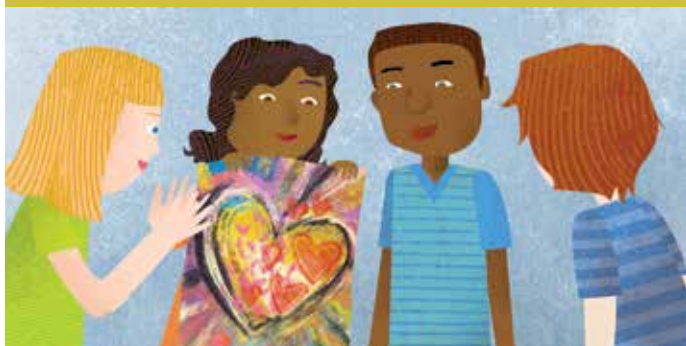
The growing interest in understanding the effects of adversities has been accompanied by an increase in the development and application of trauma-informed care (TIC). TIC describes a variety of approaches that acknowledge the impact of trauma, recognize its symptoms, respond to its effects through appropriate practices and policies, and prevent further traumatization.<sup>14</sup> TIC is increasingly used in systems and settings that serve young people and their families, including the child welfare system, early child care and education settings, healthcare settings, and

the juvenile justice system.<sup>15</sup> For schools, the essential challenge is to go beyond using a trauma-informed approach to child-level services, and to intentionally develop and foster a universal, schoolwide strategy to create a trauma-informed climate.

### How Schools Can Help

As our Child Trends colleagues have recently urged,<sup>16</sup> schools should focus on promoting the kinds of caring, supportive relationships and social-emotional skills that underlie positive development for all children. And, for those children who have experienced trauma, schools should focus on fostering the kinds of positive relationships that can help these students recover and respond resiliently to future adversities. This approach is not about singling out students who have experienced adversity, but about shifting the culture, norms, and practices of an entire school to create a safe and supportive learning environment for all students. Three possible ways to start this shift are described below.

For schools, the challenge is to develop and foster a universal, schoolwide strategy to create a trauma-informed climate.



#### Strengthen interpersonal relationships and social and emotional skills.

Research indicates several protective factors that can prevent or ameliorate the negative effects of childhood adversities.<sup>17</sup> A positive, supportive relationship with one or more adults is of primary importance.<sup>18</sup> In addition to supportive relationships, a child's own intrapersonal skills can be a buffer to the effects of adverse experiences. Children who have experienced adversities but demonstrate adaptive behaviors, such as the ability to manage their emotions, are more likely to have positive outcomes.<sup>19</sup> Children and adults alike can cultivate resilience—for example, through practicing self-care routines and strengthening key social and emotional skills such as empathy, self-regulation, and self-efficacy.<sup>20</sup>

#### Support students' physical and mental health needs.

In addition, there is a critical need in schools for more support staff (for example, school social workers, nurses, and psychologists) with the training to serve the needs of students. In many communities, these services are lacking or inadequate, underscoring the importance of schools as a frontline setting for addressing trauma and other mental health concerns.<sup>21</sup>

#### Reduce practices that may cause traumatic stress or retraumatize students.

A key principle of trauma-informed care is to avoid practices that have the potential to cause, or reactivate, trauma. Our Child Trends colleagues recently addressed this risk: "State policies that allow or encourage exclusionary or punitive practices may restrict students' access to services and cause further trauma. For student behaviors that may reflect underlying unmet needs—such as bullying and truancy—punitive practices may be especially counterproductive. Policymakers should examine current policies for such provisions and consider how to support school communities in transitioning away from such practices."<sup>22</sup>

Notably, we do *not* recommend that schools adopt universal or targeted screening for ACEs. A possible exception would be to include related items in anonymous schoolwide surveys to raise broad awareness of the prevalence of potentially traumatic experiences. At this point in our understanding of trauma, there are many more drawbacks to a screening-focused strategy than there are benefits. The limitations of current screening tools include a conception of adversity that is both overly narrow and imprecise, a neglect of children's strengths, and an inability to provide guidance on tailoring responses to a particular individual's symptoms and circumstances. In addition, many communities still lack the capacity to offer appropriate services to meet these needs.<sup>23</sup>

#### How Policymakers Can Help Educators Create Supportive Learning Environments

Our Child Trends colleagues Kristen Harper and Deborah Temkin recommended a three-part strategy for trauma-informed education policy in a recent report, excerpted here:<sup>24</sup>

Build a statewide initiative to create supportive learning environments. State policy should promote teaching and learning environments that integrate the goals of academic success, health, safety, and a positive school climate, and establish a process for school communities and state agencies to enact this vision.

Review and revise state policy. Existing state policies can either facilitate or run counter to efforts to create supportive learning environments. Policymakers should review initiatives regarding school safety and security to ensure they are consistent with trauma-informed principles.

Support locally based, school-driven initiatives to create supportive learning environments. School communities should have the resources required to engage in an inclusive process of exploring the community's needs, including schools' readiness to make changes in their culture and improve their capacity to meet the needs of all children.



**D**espite increasing attention and resources devoted to preventing adverse childhood experiences and building resilient individuals and communities, ACEs remain common in the United States: nearly half of all children nationally and in most states have experienced at least one ACE. Disturbingly, black and Hispanic children and youth in almost all regions of the country are more likely to experience ACEs than their white and Asian peers.

However, adverse experiences do not necessarily lead to toxic levels of stress; here, social support and other protective factors play critical buffering roles. The cultivation of supportive, protective conditions by parents and other adults, by children themselves, and by their broader communities provides an ambitious but essential public health agenda. Schools and educators play a critical role in that agenda, as well. All children should be able to learn in a supportive environment, within a school culture that promotes and supports the health and safety of students and adults. □

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**Social support and other protective factors play critical buffering roles.**

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*(Continued on page 43)*



# Teaching in a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom

What Educators Can Do to Support Students



BY PATRICIA A. JENNINGS

**T**he first step in providing support to children and teens exposed to trauma and adversity is helping them to feel safe at school and demonstrating alternative working models of relationships. By spending time in a supportive classroom, students can learn that school can be a safe place, and that teachers and peers can be caring, thoughtful people who are supportive and have their best interests at heart. Under these conditions, the school and the people in the school can serve as alternative attachment figures. This is not to say that teachers become their surrogate parents and that their peers become surrogate siblings. Teacher-student and student-peer relationships are different from family relationships, but they can serve a similar function by helping trauma-exposed kids develop new models of relationships and new models of the self in relation to others.

As human beings, the most important factor for our survival has been supportive relationships. We are strongly motivated to

be accepted as part of a community that recognizes our value and provides opportunities to contribute and receive. We evolved to be part of families and communities composed of individuals who care for one another. Without these bonds, human beings would not have survived or flourished as we have. However, today we are losing touch with these bonds. Trauma and adversity disrupt the development of attachment bonds that children need to develop their full potential. Our families and communities are fragmented. It's harder for children and teens to find alternative attachment figures to connect with, leaving many kids unmoored. There are growing numbers of children left without homes and caregivers due to the opioid crisis.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, large numbers of refugee children and teens fleeing from severe hardship and war are entering our schools with special needs; many of them arrive unaccompanied by parents and require foster care.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, which is excerpted from my book *The Trauma-Sensitive Classroom: Building Resilience with Compassionate Teaching*, we'll explore how to build caring relationships with trauma-exposed students and how to help them build positive relationships with their peers. Admittedly, this is no easy task. Trauma-exposed students may interfere with classroom learning, which can be frustrating. Helping them can be particularly challenging because they may have difficulty trusting peers and adults, especially authority figures. They may be overly defensive, anticipating adult criticism, or defiant, as a way to assert control. Because trauma interferes with the development of relationship skills and emotion

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regulation, they often find themselves in conflict with peers, either victims or perpetrators of bullying. Educators also need to be aware of children who tend to dissociate and become invisible as a way to cope in social situations, leading to social isolation.

## How Teachers Help Build Resilience

Clearly, traumatized students can behave in ways that may disrupt and interfere with teaching and learning. However, when we realize that their behavior—especially, lack of self-control—is a symptom of the trauma, we can begin to understand them and provide them with the support they need.

What can we, as their teachers, do? In 1998, two researchers of child development published a landmark review article of studies of children exposed to trauma and adversity.<sup>3</sup> They wanted to better understand why so many children develop competency despite exposure to adverse conditions. They found three important factors associated with resilience among all children and teens, both those normally developing and those considered at risk. The factors are:

- A strong parent-child relationship, or a strong relationship with a surrogate caregiver who serves as a mentor if a parent is unavailable;
- Good cognitive skills, which are predictors of academic success and lead to prosocial behavior; and
- The ability to self-regulate emotions, attention, and behaviors.

While exposure to trauma and adversity can impair these three factors, bolstering them can help students become successful. This is why it is so important to help these children and teens acquire the underlying skills they need to function in school. Doing so will not only help them perform better academically, it will also help them heal from the effects of trauma and adversity.

Teachers and other school staff are well positioned to support these children and teens.\* If the extended periods of time students spend in school take place in a safe, calm, and predictable learning environment, with adults and peers who show care and respect toward them, we can help them heal. We can recognize and focus on areas of strength and build upon them. We can partner with families to strengthen students' relationships with their caregivers and promote self-regulation skills so they can achieve their academic potential.

In order to be an effective teacher for these students, a *mind shift* is needed. When a student exhibits difficulties, the tendency is to ask, "What's wrong with him?" When you find yourself doing this, shift the question to: "What happened to him and how did he learn to adapt to it?" This will help you understand where he is coming from and how best to help him. One thing not to do is to ask him to explain himself by asking, "Why did you do that?" His behavior is likely as perplexing to him as it may be to you!

## The Importance of Teacher Support

Years of research have shown that a connection with a sensitive teacher can shape the healthy working relationships children normally acquire in their relationships with loving and consistent caregivers, especially for students exposed to multiple risk factors.<sup>4</sup> Social learning theory, which proposes that people learn from one



By spending time in a supportive classroom, students can learn that school can be a safe place.

another by observation, imitation, and modeling, has been applied to understanding how teachers' emotional support can have positive impacts on older students.<sup>5</sup> Teachers become role models of healthy social and emotional behavior for teens to emulate. In this way, a teacher's social support can promote healthy emotional skills, healthy relationships, and motivation to learn.

Research has found three crucial dimensions of teacher-student relationships among elementary-aged students: *closeness*, *conflict*, and *dependency*.<sup>6</sup> Closeness refers to the degree of positive emotion and warmth the teacher and student express to one another and is associated with positive academic and behavioral outcomes. Conflict refers to the expressions of negative emotion and lack of rapport between the teacher and student and is associated with poor academic and behavioral outcomes. Dependency refers to the extent the student clings to the teacher or demonstrates possessiveness, also associated with poor outcomes. Dependency has also been associated with attachment disorders and requires extra sensitivity from the teacher for the child to engage in meaningful learning activities.<sup>7</sup>

The critical dimensions of teacher-student relationships at the higher grades are *perceived support*, *utilization*, and *a sense of relatedness*.<sup>8</sup> Perceived support is the students' perception that the teacher is sensitive to their needs and supportive. Utilization is reflected in the willingness of students to rely on the teacher for help. A sense of relatedness is reflected in the extent to which students feel successful in their bids for belonging and acceptance. All three are associated with desirable academic and behavioral outcomes in adolescence. Similar to healthy attachment relationships between children and parents, these relational dimensions between teachers and students give students a sense of security and the safety to explore and engage in learning, which can involve risks.

\*For more on the importance of connecting with students, see "It's About Relationships" in the Winter 2015–2016 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/winter2015-2016/ashley](http://www.aft.org/ae/winter2015-2016/ashley).



A teacher's social support can promote healthy emotional skills, healthy relationships, and motivation to learn.

While there is evidence that children who enter school with insecure attachments have difficulty in their relationships with teachers, this is likely only true in cases where teachers are not highly sensitive. Researchers found that when teachers were highly sensitive, children with less secure attachments were not at risk for developing less close relationships with teachers.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, exposure to a less sensitive teacher in the early years can lead to years of relationship problems with teachers, as the quality of teacher-student relationships seems to be fairly stable. In other words, if a child has a difficult relationship with his kindergarten teacher, he is more likely to continue to have difficult relationships with future teachers.<sup>10</sup> This research points to the critical importance of the quality of teacher-student relationships in early childhood.

## Responding to Students' Stress and Trauma

A Q&A with Barbara Outten



For 20 years, Barbara Outten taught third- and fourth-graders in East St. Louis School District 189 in Illinois. Now in her second year as an instructional coach, she is also an officer with her local union, the East St. Louis Federation of Teachers. In February 2018, she attended a three-day training, the Union Response to Students' Stress and Trauma, designed to instruct teachers, paraprofessionals, school support staff, social workers, coaches, principals, and others in how to build trauma-informed and responsive school communities. Developed by the AFT and the Illinois Federation of Teachers, this training was implemented across the district in collaboration with the East St. Louis Federation of Teachers and a community initiative called

*East Side Aligned.* \* Below, Outten shares her experience with bringing this training to her colleagues at James Avant Elementary School this past school year.

—EDITORS

**Q** How did your district learn about this training?

**A** The Illinois Federation of Teachers presented it to our union. I knew right away it was something that would help our school district. So we took it to the district's administrators and convinced them that this was a training all our educators and staff members needed. We wanted everyone who comes in contact with our students to be trained.

After the district signed on, a labor-management team made up of three union members and an administrator was established for each school building. Each team would attend the training, and then team members would conduct trainings for their building.

**Q** What did the training entail?

**A** Because I attended the initial training last February to become a trainer myself, I was involved in rolling out the training both in our district and in my particular school. The first thing we did was to define trauma as a response to an experience that is so stressful that it

overwhelms a person's ability to cope. Then we discussed how trauma can manifest in students and possible long-term effects. We explained how trauma affects brain development in children and how it can result in physical and psychological health issues. We shared how it can prevent children from being able to form healthy relationships, and how it can impair their learning.

We emphasized that children who experience trauma are not damaged. They can heal from this. That healing starts with everyday gestures that we can make to celebrate them. Compliment them on a daily basis, if possible. Comfort them. Stay calm. Be present. Educators need to listen to children and show that we're really interested in them. And then we should try to inspire them. These are protective actions that can help offset the trauma they've experienced and how the trauma affects them.

**Q** Why is there a need for such training in your district?

**A** In East St. Louis, we have around 5,700 students enrolled in 10 public schools. We have a 73 percent graduation rate, a 17 percent mobility rate, and an 82 percent chronic absenteeism rate, which is the percentage of students who miss 10 percent or more of school days per year. Our district's chronic absenteeism rate is much higher than the state average of 17 percent. Roughly 83 percent of students come from low-income families, and 6 percent are homeless.

\*For more on East Side Aligned, see [www.eastsidealigned.org](http://www.eastsidealigned.org).



## What Is Emotional Support?

An important predictor of positive teacher-student relationships is teachers' emotional supportiveness. What does this look like in the classroom and how can we cultivate it in our relationships with our students? Bob Pianta, dean of the Curry School of Education, where I work, was one of the first to study teacher-student relationships and interactions. He developed an observational measure called the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), which is now a widely used and well-validated rating scale designed for applied research on teacher-student interactions.<sup>11</sup> This measure is organized according to three latent categories of teacher-student interactions: class organization, instructional support, and emotional support. Classroom organization focuses on interactions associated with classroom management. Instructional support focuses on

interactions that support academic instruction. In the box on page 17, I focus on the emotional support domain, which is composed of four dimensions: Positive Climate, Negative Climate, Teacher Sensitivity, and Regard for Student Perspectives. A classroom rated high on the domain of emotional support would score high on Positive Climate, Teacher Sensitivity, and Regard for Student Perspectives, and low on Negative Climate.

## How Teachers Can Build Caring Relationships

As the teacher, you are the social leader of the classroom, and your students will follow your lead when it comes to relating to other students in the classroom. This is why it's very important to model the kinds of interpersonal interactions you want them to engage in. I spent 15 years supervising student teachers enrolled in a teacher education



Those kinds of positive home-school connections didn't happen before.

Many children come from single-parent homes. We have a large population of students who are being raised by grandparents. We have many students with an incarcerated parent. Some of our children have even witnessed violent crimes.

Such factors are considered adverse childhood experiences (for more on this, see the article on page 8). Because these experiences are traumatic, they can contribute to challenging behaviors in school. Those behaviors can make it difficult to teach lessons on a daily basis. As a teacher, it sometimes feels like you're putting out one fire, and then you turn around and another one is just starting. A teacher might say to herself, "If only I could just teach." Our school district needed training around trauma so that we could learn how to help our students and also teach our subject matter, without burning out from our work.

Speaking of burnout, another lesson from the training was on the importance of self-care. You have got to take care of yourself in order to do what we do here. The training included information about 50 different types of self-care, whether it's reading a book for a set number of minutes per day or walking your dog or doing yoga. The training highlighted not only the need to come up with your own plan for self-care, but also the importance

of finding somebody to hold you accountable for adhering to that plan.

As a result of the training, everyone in our district agreed to be part of a system we call Check and Connect. All students in our schools select an adult to call upon to help calm and assist them if they ever experience a meltdown or have some kind of outburst at school. Students can choose a classroom teacher, a paraprofessional, a custodian, anyone who works in the building. Classroom teachers have access to a list of adults each student has chosen so that they can contact them when necessary.

Once contacted, the adult might take the child for a walk to help him or her calm down from the trigger. This is a step that did not happen before. It's a change in mindset. When an outburst happens, our teachers are now recognizing that they haven't done anything wrong to make that child angry. And they're working on not taking any outburst personally. Instead, they're giving the child a chance to talk it out with an adult of his or her choice.

Now, every child has a dedicated adult in the school building to talk with when he or she needs help. Students know they can trust an adult in the building and tell that person what's bothering them and it will be OK.

Not all schools in our district have certified social workers. There isn't enough funding for that. But the state does allow schools to hire noncertified social workers who have completed a certain amount of coursework, and our school has one. He's very passionate about what he does, and he was a member of our train-the-trainers team.

**Q** What else is your school doing differently in terms of supporting students?

**A** Besides the Check and Connect system, classrooms engage in restorative circles. In these circles, teachers help students to resolve conflicts with peers and head off disruptive behavior. We're catching things before they happen because educators are taking the time to listen. Students are watching. They're seeing. And classroom referrals for behavior are way down from even just a year ago.

But teachers aren't just engaging with students and parents when something is wrong. The other day, a physical education teacher walked by and said, "Ms. Outten, you're going to be so proud of me." And I said, "Why? What's up?" And he said, "I called a parent today to say how great of a day a student was having."

Those kinds of positive home-school connections didn't happen before.

program. During this time, I learned much about how teachers' classroom behavior can build or impair relationships with their students. No teacher intentionally sets out to create negative relationships with students; it happens unintentionally. However, once a teacher and student have begun to engage in a coercive cycle of negative interactions, it becomes a model for the other students to follow.

### Model Respectful Interactions

In one classroom I visited, Ms. Rohan was introducing her fifth-grade students to a new novel. As she gave them an overview of the author and the background of the story, she noticed that Joey was fiddling with a piece of paper on his desk. She became visibly annoyed and sharply told him to stop. It was obvious that there was already tension between the two of them, and I could see that Joey was not going to stop, primarily because she had called him out so publicly, and he was embarrassed. I was right: he kept fiddling, and Ms. Rohan became more frustrated. Finally, she went up to his desk, grabbed the piece of paper he was fiddling with, and threw it in the garbage.

This is an example of a power struggle. Ms. Rohan's relationship with Joey was already strained, and she was primed to overreact. What he was doing wasn't really a big deal, and when it started out, it wasn't an intentional attempt to disrupt class and make Ms. Rohan unhappy. But because of her preconceived idea, she assumed that his behavior was intentional, which increased her frustration and triggered her overreaction. When she told him to stop, she publicly shamed him, which made him want to dig in his heels to save face. She finally took the upper hand by grabbing

the paper on his desk and throwing it away.

If a student had grabbed a piece of paper from another student and thrown it away, what would we think? That she was a bully? That she was invading his space and taking something that didn't belong to her? When we act as if the rules don't apply to us, we send the message to students that *might makes right*; we are basically modeling bullying behavior. When students observe teachers treating a fellow student this way, two things can happen. First, the students learn that the fellow student doesn't deserve their respect. If the teacher doesn't respect him, why should they? They will begin to treat the student the same way as the teacher, possibly taking things, too, and being overly critical and judgmental of him. The second thing that happens is that the students learn not to trust the teacher, thinking, "If she does that to Joey, she might do it to me, too." Students who already feel less than safe feel frightened.

As you interact with your students, make sure you follow your own rules. Treat each student with respect and kindness. If you find yourself becoming annoyed, work to calm yourself down so that you don't unintentionally rupture a relationship and trigger a power struggle.

### Cultivate Supportive Peer Relationships

Besides serving as a model of social behavior, teachers influence classroom social dynamics directly and indirectly. They can take actions to manage or change the social network patterns of their classrooms, or they can indirectly affect the network patterns through general teaching practices. New research has shown that teachers can affect a classroom's social status patterns, such as peer norms and status hierarchies, and social affiliation patterns, such as informal peer groups and friendships, which can dramatically affect the classroom climate.<sup>12</sup> In fact, just being more aware of the social networks can have a positive effect on your classroom. For example, peer norms against aggressive behavior are stronger when teachers' reports of their classroom peer networks are more accurate.<sup>13</sup>

You can tune in to your class as a social group by occasionally stepping back and mindfully observing during a time when your students have some choice about their social dynamics directly and indirectly. Imagine you are observing this group of students for the first time. How are they grouping themselves? Who's being victimized by whom? Who's left out? Who is leading the pack?

In a large longitudinal study of elementary classrooms, researchers examined peer networks and teachers' attunement with their classrooms' peer networks.<sup>14</sup> They also asked the teachers what active measures they took to manage the friendships, aggression, and social hierarchies in their classrooms. The researchers classified these measures as follows: mitigating status extremes, supporting isolated children, managing aggression, and promoting positive behavior. Finally, they observed the teachers' classroom interactions and rated them using the CLASS measure described above.

They found that teachers who use "more active" strategies to manage friendships, aggression, and hierarchies have students who show "more positive" patterns in their social behavior and their academic adjustment across the school year. These effects were stronger if the teacher was also rated as "more responsive" and found to be "more attuned" to the social network dynamics of her or his classroom. Generally, teachers in this study reported working

As the teacher, you are the social leader of the classroom, and your students will follow your lead.





to reduce the status extremes in their classrooms by providing many alternatives for obtaining status, such as creating opportunities for low-status children to receive recognition, or by reducing the importance of status altogether. The more teachers reported taking active measures, the more their students reported feeling a stronger sense of peer community, higher levels of bonding with the school community, and enjoyment of learning by the end of the school year. One notable finding was that teachers who worked to support friendships, especially for children who seemed isolated, had students who reported a stronger sense of peer community. This research provides us with clear evidence that the active measures we take to improve classroom climate can be very effective and can support our trauma-exposed students. □

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The active measures we take to improve classroom climate can be very effective and can support our trauma-exposed students.

## Understanding Emotional Support

**Positive Climate** reflects the strong emotional connection between the teacher and students and among students in the classroom, and the warmth, respect, and enjoyment communicated by verbal and nonverbal interactions. In a classroom rated high on Positive Climate, students appear comfortable to seek the physical proximity of the teacher, and the teacher and students share moments of positive emotions and show enjoyment of shared activities. Students are helpful to one another and engage in social conversation. The teacher and students express affection to one another through verbal and physical gestures and show respect through eye contact, warm and calm voices, respectful language, and cooperation.

**Negative Climate**, by contrast, reflects the general level of expressed negativity in the classroom and the frequency, quality, and intensity of teacher and peer negativity. In a classroom rated high on

Negative Climate, the teacher and students may appear irritable, angry, and aggressive. There is a tendency for the teacher to engage in punitive control strategies such as yelling, making threats, and issuing harsh punishments. The teacher and students may engage in sarcastic and disrespectful communication, including teasing and humiliation. In extreme cases, one may observe victimization, bullying, and physical punishment.

**Teacher Sensitivity** captures the teacher's awareness of and responsiveness to students' academic and emotional needs. In a classroom rated high on Teacher Sensitivity, one would observe a teacher who is proactive. She anticipates problems and plans accordingly and notices when students lack understanding or are having difficulty with an assignment. She recognizes and acknowledges the students' emotions and provides comfort and individual support when needed.

Students seek support when they need it and are willing to take risks in the learning process.

**Regard for Student Perspectives** reflects the degree to which the teacher-student interactions and classroom activities focus on students' needs, interests, motivations, and points of view and encourage student responsibility and autonomy. In a classroom rated high on Regard for Student Perspectives, the teacher shows flexibility, follows the students' lead, and incorporates students' ideas in her lessons. She supports student autonomy and independence by allowing some choice and giving students classroom responsibilities. She encourages student expression and elicits their ideas and perspectives. She allows freedom of movement in the classroom and allows students to save face when there's a conflict.

—P.A.J.

# Trauma Care in Schools

Creating Safe Environments for Students with Adverse Childhood Experiences



BY EILEEN A. DOMBO AND  
CHRISTINE ANLAUF SABATINO

**E**xposure to traumatic events in childhood and adolescence can have lasting negative social, emotional, and educational effects. For schools, or any environment that serves children, to be truly trauma-informed, they must address three crucial areas: safety, connection, and emotional and behavioral regulation. This article, which is excerpted from our book *Creating Trauma-Informed Schools: A Guide for School Social Workers and Educators*, will explore these three areas as the foundational pillars of a trauma-informed school environment.

## Safety

At their core, all traumatic events are a violation of a sense of safety in the world and with others. People and places that are supposed to be attuned to the needs of children are often the ones that violate trust through abuse, neglect, and violence. Given that the caregiver-child relationship is the foundation on

which the child's senses of safety, competence, and self-containment are built, when this relationship is strife with traumatic events, those capacities are severely compromised.<sup>1</sup> Abusive parents and caregivers, violence in communities, and shootings in schools\* are all too commonplace in American culture. The presence of traumatic stress has long-lasting negative impacts on children, and when severe and prolonged, it can be so toxic that it leads to neurological and biological health problems.<sup>2</sup>

What does safety look like? For children and adolescents, safety is felt through connections with people who have a calm and focused presence. They are attuned to the child's actions, words, and nonverbal communications and respect the child's boundaries and rights. Power and control are essential to safety in that the child is allowed to be in charge of himself or herself as much as is developmentally appropriate. When power is used to be punitive and demeaning, children do not feel safe. When seeking safety, children look for someone to be predictable and consistent. Following through on what they say they are going to do and avoiding chaotic and disorganized behaviors are essential to safety. All these require the person to stay calm, regulated, and focused when the child is dysregulated, out of control, or even aggressive. Some examples of safe and unsafe behaviors in a school setting are found in the box on page 20.

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\*The School Social Work Association of America has taken a stand to stop gun violence in schools. To read its position paper on the issue, visit [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/426a18\\_72b6376c6a9645d7ad256fe9fe4004f3.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/426a18_72b6376c6a9645d7ad256fe9fe4004f3.pdf).



Classrooms that feel safe to children are those that have clear expectations, well-defined routines, time for transition, choices whenever possible, and attuned teachers. Specific events in the classroom can serve as reminders of previous traumatic and therefore unsafe experiences. These current events *trigger* reminders of past events.<sup>3</sup> Some examples of triggers in a classroom setting that can prompt a child to react from a place of traumatic stress and feeling unsafe are:

- Sensory reminders of the trauma—smells, sounds, or images that remind the child of a person, place, or time that is connected to a traumatic event.
- Touch—whether to focus the child with a gentle hand on the shoulder or a physical restraint of a child who is a danger to others. Touch that is unwanted or unexpected can be a trauma trigger.
- Fighting, arguing, or yelling, whether between children or between an adult and a child.

Some triggers can be managed by decreasing certain behaviors, such as yelling by the teacher or adult in charge, but others can be difficult to anticipate and manage because one cannot predict what a trigger might be for a specific child. For example, a child may have a traumatic stress reaction when triggered by the smell of an orange. Perhaps that child was abused by a caregiver who regularly ate oranges, and the smell of the orange being peeled reminds the child of that person and the abusive behavior.

A teacher would have no way of anticipating this, and the child may not even be aware that the smell of the orange is a trigger until that moment when the child is emotionally reactive, out of control, or dissociative. What teachers can do is be curious about what may have prompted the sudden change in that child and include a traumatic trigger as one of the possible explanations for the behavior. They also may pick up clues to triggering events by listening carefully to the way children discuss subjective experiences. There are signs about how a child primarily receives, interprets, and transmits sensory stimuli and expresses them in terms of sight (visual), sound (auditory), touch (kinesthetic), smell (olfactory), and taste (gustatory).<sup>4</sup> Does a child use representational language that *pictures, hears, feels, whiffs, or flavors* an experience that may be helpful in recognizing how a child is triggered? Trauma-informed practices mean being compassionate and seeing behaviors and actions as attempts to express distress and seek safety.<sup>5</sup> Current events provide ample evidence of how important it is to understand the impact of violence on child development and learning.

### Connection

Children who have had traumatic experiences inflicted on them by adults learn that adults are not to be trusted. Children entering a new school or a new classroom will be careful around adults and will watch closely for indications that they need to protect themselves. This sense of hypervigilance and wariness will make it difficult for them to connect with adults in a school setting, but connection is essential for the development of safe, trauma-informed settings.<sup>6</sup> Power imbalances also disrupt connection. In the classroom, teachers are in charge and make the rules, which can lead children to feel powerless. If a child has experienced an adult using his or her power to abuse others, this power imbalance will impair connection. It may also create a situation in which the

child seeks power and control to feel safe, which creates disconnection.<sup>7</sup> In trauma-informed classrooms, teachers recognize this dynamic and strive to create corrective experiences with an adult who is associated with positive experiences. Trauma can be re-enacted in relationships with adults who react to the child's search for safety, power, and control with anger, punishment, suspicion, and distance.<sup>8</sup>

Adults can get drawn into a trauma re-enactment with a child who is testing them to learn how they respond. Often, this is not done purposefully but instead comes from a defensive, self-protective action when a child engages as he or she would with the abusive



Safety is felt through connections with people who have a calm and focused presence.

adult. In other words, in order to know what to expect and to confirm the child's suspicion that the adult is unsafe, the child may engage in a conflictual way. This can be done through behavior that is aggressive or unsafe, verbal assaults designed to hurt or bring about rejection, or mistreatment of another child in the classroom. This child will often be described as being "provocative" or "self-sabotaging," but it is important to not label but rather to wonder why. Why would this child behave this way? When this is seen as a traumatic reaction, a self-protection against vulnerability and being harmed yet again by an adult the child is supposed to trust, it makes sense. It is a survival behavior. When viewed in this manner, it can be helpful in not personalizing the behavior. When the adult does not respond as expected, then there is hope for safety.

In order to establish connection in school settings, it can be helpful to start off the school year by setting some ground rules for the classroom and asking each student to voice his or her own needs, either by creating a rule or agreeing with a rule made by a peer. Connecting with each student's basic need for safety and

Instead of responding in anger or exasperation to a student who is "acting out," respond with curiosity.



respect is a good start. Connecting to children through their behavior is also a way to get to know them better.<sup>9</sup> Instead of responding in anger or exasperation to a student who is "acting out," respond with curiosity. "I noticed that you threw your pen across the room when I corrected your spelling. I'm wondering if you noticed that too, and what you think that's about?" This neutral, curious, and concerned stance shows the child that you are not judging but want to connect.

The school environment offers a major opportunity for children to develop positive experiences through new social interactions with adults and peers that are in contrast to their own negative models of relationships. Classroom connections for maltreated students are developed through consistent adult responses, helping them to understand the rules that create predictable responses. Peer interactions are the hallmark of school-aged children's experiences, and classrooms are a natural context within which to help traumatized children make classmate connections.<sup>10</sup>

Routines and rituals are an antidote to life's chaos and disruptions, allowing children to shift out of survival mode and into new patterns of adaptive social interactions with adults.<sup>11</sup> Rather than reacting to overt behaviors, teachers can model for students how to react to the emotional message behind a student's behavior. They can help children learn strategies for negotiating interpersonal problems in a supportive context. Research shows that children flourish when they can predict environmental responses and understand the rules for interactions.<sup>12</sup>

### Emotional and Behavioral Regulation

The ability to appropriately manage feelings, emotions, and impulses is impaired by childhood trauma.<sup>13</sup> Emotional arousal can feel scary to a child who has not been taught how to self-

## Safe and Unsafe Teaching Behaviors

Safe	Unsafe
Focusing on the student when he or she speaks to you.	Not making eye contact, looking away, or looking at something else when the student is speaking.
Speaking in a moderate tone and volume.	Yelling, muttering under your breath, or whispering to someone else.
Exhibiting consistent behavior so your students know what to expect.	Displaying erratic, unpredictable behavior.
Establishing clear rules that apply to everyone, with consequences appropriate to the violation.	Creating no rules, rules that are randomly and unevenly applied, or punitive measures that do not match the violation.
Having the ability to control your emotions and stay calm.	Having big emotional swings or outbursts, or being easily startled or rattled.
Communicating boundaries and respecting others' boundaries.	Setting no boundaries and not following others' boundaries.
Providing attention and care to all students.	Favoring some students and giving preferential treatment.
Allowing students to leave the classroom to go to a safe place if they feel triggered and unsafe.	Using threats to make students think they are unable to leave the classroom for any reason.
Practicing unconditional, positive regard for all students.	Judging some students for their behavior or taking student behavior personally.
Providing honesty and transparency.	Lying, obfuscating, or refusing to explain reasons for actions.
Holding all students to high standards and expecting them to work to their ability.	Ignoring or not expecting much from students because of their "problems."

—E.A.D. and C.A.S.





soothe and calm down. Imagine you are hearing an alarm go off in your house; it's loud, dark, and scary, and you cannot find where the noise is coming from to turn it off. In these cases, children need to be taught how to identify and appropriately express emotions. They also require guidance on how to tolerate distressing emotions and calm themselves through self-soothing and self-regulation.<sup>14</sup> In a classroom setting, adults can help children with this essential task in a number of ways:

1. Label the emotions you see the children demonstrating. This will give them the language they are lacking. Much like learning the Spanish word for "door," the children are learning the language of emotions. By labeling the emotion as it is being expressed, the children learn what is going on inside themselves and also are calmed by that knowledge.<sup>15</sup>
2. Place emotion faces with the identifying labels around the classroom. This will help children develop the language of emotion as they learn what sad, happy, confused, and so forth look like.
3. Provide an opportunity to reflect on the behavior and feelings exhibited.<sup>16</sup> Depending on the developmental stage, this can take the form of a drawing, poem, or essay. Having a quiet space in the school where the child can go to reflect and process what happened and why is a wonderful way to achieve this task.
4. Work with the child to calm down. This is also known as co-regulation and is particularly useful with adolescents.<sup>17</sup> By focusing on the emotions, not the behaviors, and staying calm while speaking in a soothing voice, the adult identifies the distress and invites the child into a reflective, problem-solving encounter.
5. Add calming and mindfulness exercises for all the kids in the class during times of transition. This can be particularly good after a test or a fire/safety drill. These exercises can include listening to breathing, lying on the floor with a stuffed animal on

the stomach and watching it move up and down,<sup>18</sup> mindfully eating a small piece of chocolate or candy while focusing on the taste and sensations in their bodies, or other activities.

6. Use times of emotional dysregulation and distress as an opportunity to educate children about how their brain works and how we can all get overwhelmed by feelings. Neuroscientist Dan Siegel has great videos on his website that explain how the brain works ([www.drdansiegel.com](http://www.drdansiegel.com)). These videos can be shown to individual kids or to the entire class to help them better understand some of the brain science behind behaviors.

**T**hrough establishing safety, connection, and emotional and behavioral regulation in schools, the three pillars create the foundation of a trauma-informed structure for children in schools. The more children feel safe and connected to the adults around them, the more they can learn to understand and regulate their emotions and behaviors. This creates a safe learning environment for all children. □

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Children flourish when they can predict environmental responses and understand the rules for interactions.



# Understanding the Needs of Children with Incarcerated Parents

What Educators Should Know



BY KRISTIN TURNEY

**T**he incarceration rate in the United States has increased dramatically in the past half century. In 1970, about 100 out of every 100,000 individuals in the United States were confined in prison. Today, that number is five times as large, with nearly 500 out of every 100,000 individuals confined in prison. This rate increase is especially striking among poorly educated men of color living in disadvantaged neighborhoods.<sup>1</sup>

It is perhaps not surprising that confinement in jail or prison has deleterious consequences for currently and formerly incarcerated adults. Incarcerated individuals generally arrive in jail or prison with relatively low educational skills and low educational attainment. And, though there are sometimes ways to engage in educational opportunities while incarcerated (e.g., via training programs or opportunities to receive a GED), individuals experience barriers to engaging in additional educational opportunities upon their release.<sup>2</sup> In an era where incarceration is both common and unequally distributed across the population, concentrated among some of the most vulnerable citizens, incarceration has likely exacerbated race/ethnic and social class inequalities in

educational attainment among American adults.<sup>3</sup>

But incarceration is not only consequential for those who churn through the criminal justice system. It also affects those in their family and personal lives, including parents, romantic partners, and sons and daughters. The majority of incarcerated individuals have at least one child.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the increase in the U.S. incarceration rate means that an increasing number of children—and a substantial number of children—experience the incarceration of a parent at some point in childhood or adolescence. Research shows that parental incarceration negatively affects children's educational outcomes and opportunities.

## Children's Exposure to Parental Incarceration

Currently, an estimated 2.7 million children—or 1 in 28 of those under the age of 18—have a biological mother or father who is incarcerated in a local jail, state prison, or federal prison. And, given that most individuals are eventually released from confinement, back to their families and communities, even more children will experience the incarceration of a parent over the course of their lives. Data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study—a longitudinal study of nearly 5,000 U.S. children born in urban areas around the turn of the century—show that, by age 9, about one-third of children experience the incarceration of a biological father and about one-tenth of children experience the incarceration of a biological mother.<sup>5</sup>

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Importantly, not all children are equally likely to experience parental incarceration. Parental incarceration is more common among children of color (compared with white children), among children of parents with low educational attainment (compared with children of parents with high educational attainment), and among children living in disadvantaged neighborhoods (compared with children living in advantaged neighborhoods).

Consider differences in exposure to parental incarceration by race and ethnicity. Recent estimates suggest that by age 17, 24 percent of black children, 11 percent of Hispanic children, and 4 percent of white children will experience parental incarceration. Among children of parents without a high school diploma, 62 percent of black children are exposed to parental incarceration, compared with 17 percent of Hispanic children and 15 percent of white children. There is also regional variation in children's risks of exposure to parental incarceration, with children living in the South having the highest risks of having an incarcerated parent and children living in the Northeast having the lowest risks.<sup>6</sup> Geographic variation also depends on race and ethnicity, as black children have the highest cumulative risk in the Midwest, Northeast, and two southern states, and Hispanic children have the highest cumulative risk in the West and Northeast.

Therefore, especially in urban and socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods, parental incarceration represents an important obstacle for a large number of children and for the educational institutions they attend. This article discusses what teachers, principals, and counselors, who regularly interact with children of incarcerated or formerly incarcerated parents, should know about this particular student population.

### Why Might Parental Incarceration Impede Children's Educational Opportunities and Outcomes?

Parental incarceration is an adverse childhood experience, defined as a potentially stressful or traumatic event that has lasting consequences for children's health and well-being. It often occurs in conjunction with other stressors, such as parental divorce, family economic instability, and household substance abuse. But the stressor of parental incarceration is also unique from other types of family stressors or adverse childhood experiences.

Parental incarceration involves the removal of a mother or father from the child's household or daily routine. This removal is a traumatic incident for many children and may be accompanied by other corresponding traumatic experiences, such as witnessing the arrest of a parent or encountering uncertainty regarding how long the parent will remain away from the household. This removal is often stigmatizing, too, and can produce isolation and shame that impedes social support systems, interactions with peers and teachers, and children's educational opportunities and outcomes.

In the wake of parental incarceration, families experience a variety of challenges, including economic insecurity, altered household and relationship dynamics and routines, changes in parenting, and changes in parental health. Families also face economic insecurity. Given that most incarcerated parents, prior to their incarceration, were working, incarceration leads to an immediate decline in family income, an increase in material hardship, and an increased reliance on public assistance.<sup>7</sup>

Parental incarceration generates additional economic costs for families, including those associated with the incarceration, such as making bail, paying for legal representation, or paying fines and fees; costs associated with maintaining contact with the incarcerated parent, such as paying for telephone calls or putting money on his or her "books"; and indirect costs associated with the parent's incarceration, such as taking time off of work to attend court dates or needing to pay for the child care necessary in the parent's absence.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, children with an incarcerated mother or father face new economic challenges that stem directly from the incarceration of their parent, in addition to the economic challenges that may have led up to the arrest.

Research documents that children with incarcerated parents do have difficulties progressing through school.

Parental incarceration can alter household and relationship dynamics quite dramatically. It is common for children's living arrangements to change as a result of parental incarceration, either via children moving to a different household entirely or via children experiencing a change in their household composition. The degree to which these dynamics change may depend on the gender of the incarcerated parent. Children of incarcerated fathers often (but not always) remain living with their mothers. Children of incarcerated mothers sometimes remain living with their fathers but more commonly spend time living with extended family members and are sometimes placed in the foster care system.

Relationship dynamics between children's parents can also change. Maintaining romantic relationships while one partner is behind bars is challenging, given the far distance of prisons to some communities, the often inflexible visiting schedules, and the high cost of making long-distance phone calls from prison. It may be equally difficult to preserve romantic relationships after release. For example, research shows that the incarceration experience may encourage men to engage in violent behavior.<sup>9</sup> These altered relationship dynamics mean that children of incarcerated parents experience household instability.

Parental incarceration may also lead to disengaged, ineffective parenting by mothers and fathers. During incarceration, parents are unable to engage with their children, potentially leading to long-term reductions in parental involvement with children growing accustomed to—and suffering from—this separation. In this regard, incarceration is comparable to other prolonged absences (such as military deployment), as the extended time away from children may inhibit future parental involvement even in the absence of other changes in family life. Also, stressors associated with parental incarceration may cause the nonincarcerated parent to change his or her parenting behaviors.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, parental incarceration may affect children's educational outcomes via its consequences for parental health. Incarceration is linked to reduced physical and mental health among the incarcerated. And the period a current or former romantic partner is incarcerated may be one fraught with anxiety, uncertainty, and loneliness for the partner left behind.

### How Teachers and Schools Can Assist Children with Incarcerated Parents

A growing body of research documents that children with incarcerated parents, and particularly children with incarcerated fathers, do have difficulties progressing through school. Negative consequences extend across many types of academic outcomes, including a large number of school absences, inappropriate special education placement, grade retention, suspension, expulsion, low test scores, and measures of educational attainment, such as high school graduation and college attendance.<sup>11</sup> The

Knowing that parental incarceration is relatively common may help alleviate some of the stigma.

consequences also extend to children's behavioral problems. For example, children of incarcerated fathers, compared with their counterparts without incarcerated fathers, have greater internalizing problems (e.g., experiencing feelings of worthlessness or inferiority), externalizing problems (e.g., engaging in fights and bullying), and attention problems (e.g., engaging in impulsive behavior and being unable to sit still).<sup>12</sup> Most existing research focuses on the consequences of paternal incarceration, as opposed to maternal incarceration or the more general parental incarceration, likely because more children are affected by the incarceration of a father than the incarceration of a mother. That said, both paternal and maternal incarceration may have deleterious consequences for children's educational outcomes.

Given the link between parental incarceration and children's well-being, as well as the fact that children spend a substantial amount of time in school, schools provide a unique opportunity to intervene and aid children who have currently or formerly incarcerated parents. The existing research has a number of implications for how educational institutions may best serve children of incarcerated parents.

First, it may be useful to increase awareness among teachers and administrators about the prevalence of parental incarceration. They should also know that many children who experience parental incarceration also experience additional adversities in childhood, such as family instability, parental substance abuse, and violence. Knowing that parental incarceration is relatively common, especially among vulnerable children who often experience other challenges that can impair their well-being, may help alleviate some of the stigma that children of incarcerated parents encounter.

## Teaching Students with Incarcerated Parents

BY TRACEY SHOLLENBERGER LLOYD

A few weeks shy of my 22nd birthday, I stepped into my own classroom for the first time in Baltimore. Like many teachers, my background was different from that of my students. I am white and had grown up in small, solidly working-class Pennsylvania towns, whereas my students, both black and white, were living in some of the most highly distressed urban neighborhoods in the country. Despite our differences, I shared with many of my students a personal history of early self-sufficiency—and a sense of humor—that opened up opportunities for connection. Not all of my

students were a fan of my Spanish class, of course, but I prided myself on showing them that I cared and on building relationships whenever I could.

In my high school classroom, I experienced many common obstacles to developing strong relationships with students. I had large class sizes, more IEPs (individualized education plans) than seemed reasonable, and a steep learning curve with classroom management. I hadn't yet internalized the extent to which great teaching is *leadership*, and I sometimes struggled to strike a balance between caring and captaining the ship. Between lesson planning, grading, advising students in extracurricular activities, calling parents and caregivers, cleaning desks, and washing chalkboards, there was not enough time in a week, or even in a school year, to get to know all of my students' stories and build the open, supportive relationship with each student I would have wanted.

Nonetheless, I developed enough rapport with many students and their families to learn about their lives beneath the surface level. Often, they shared positive things like career goals, hidden talents, poetry or song lyrics, and dreams for the future. I also heard about difficult relationships, financial struggles, housing instability, and health concerns. At times, my students discussed their experiences with police and upcoming court dates. Sometimes I learned about parents' situations. One student told me, after missing weeks of class, that his father's health had deteriorated, and he had assumed responsibility for his father's transportation and care. Other students shared with me worries about their parents' mental health or substance use. Once a student I was certain disliked me, or at least loathed my class, arrived with a giant smile: she told me that she had just received a letter from her father in prison and learned that she would see him soon.

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Second, it may be useful to increase awareness about the specific needs and challenges of children of incarcerated parents. As noted above, these children often experience a (conscious or unconscious) social stigma from their teachers and classmates that stems directly from their parents' incarceration. Educational institutions can help in reducing this stigma.

In particular, educators can play a critical role. They can avoid singling out or drawing attention to children with incarcerated parents, and they can refrain from judging, blaming, or labeling such children. This approach may directly benefit children by reinforcing the idea that parental incarceration is not their fault. It also signals to these children's classmates that they too should refrain from judging, blaming, or labeling children of incarcerated parents. In general, educators can also avoid saying negative things about those involved in the criminal justice system, as such statements could reinforce stereotypes and stigma surrounding parental incarceration.

Children of incarcerated parents may also have other specific needs that schools can address.\* Schools may consider providing resources to children of incarcerated parents, such as developmentally appropriate books and pamphlets about parental incarceration. Teachers and librarians can encourage all students to read these books (as opposed to only children who have an incarcerated parent), which would help children of incarcerated parents but also foster awareness of this experience among their classmates (without singling out individual children).

Other resources include the Sesame Street in Communities program ([www.sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/incarceration](http://www.sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/incarceration)). This website provides videos, activities, and

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\*Community schools in particular are well positioned to support children of incarcerated parents as well as other disadvantaged youth. For more on these schools, which partner with food banks, social service agencies, higher education institutions, health clinics, businesses, and youth organizations, see "Where It All Comes Together" in the Fall 2015 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/fall2015/blank\\_villarreal](http://www.aft.org/ae/fall2015/blank_villarreal).



Since leaving the classroom in 2005, I have worked as a researcher studying issues affecting children and families, with a focus on criminal justice. I arrived at the Urban Institute in Washington, D.C., in the midst of pioneering work on prisoner reentry, motivated by the dual insights that the United States has a spectacularly high incarceration rate and that almost everyone who is sent to prison is eventually released. Back then, the effects of incarceration on individuals, families, and communities outlined in the article on page 22 were only beginning to be documented. People questioned, but had not yet assembled empirical evidence on, the extent to which incarcerating unprecedented numbers of people affected the families and communities they left behind.

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As a researcher, my challenge was to determine whether incarceration caused children's and families' trajectories to

worsen, or simply occurred alongside a range of other issues. Reflecting on my classroom experience, I wasn't sure. Although the goal of research is often to isolate the size of the effect of one condition on another, reality is messier. Plenty of students whose parents are not incarcerated are also growing up in challenging circumstances, including situations where their parents are absent due to addiction issues, military service, or long-distance jobs. I could not have correctly guessed which of my students had a parent or caregiver in prison and which did not. I didn't always know, and it would have been inappropriate to ask. But when a student, caregiver, or staff member told me that a child I was teaching had an incarcerated parent, I also don't remember feeling surprised.

What I didn't realize at the time was that, in the context I was teaching in, incarceration was devastatingly common. Not only does the United States incarcerate

people at an unusually high rate, but the experience of being incarcerated is unequally distributed. The predominantly white towns I grew up in had people in jails and prisons, of course, but that experience was far from common. By contrast, a *majority* of black men without a high school degree experience incarceration by their early 30s.<sup>1</sup> Few people in my students' neighborhoods would have been untouched by this reality.

Research on children with incarcerated parents has yielded several insights that educators may find useful. In this article, I highlight three such insights. First, although having an incarcerated father is the more common experience, having an incarcerated mother is especially likely to disrupt children's everyday lives. Among people in prison who have minor children, mothers are more likely than fathers to have been living with their children and to have been their children's primary caregiver at the time of their arrest.<sup>2</sup>

articles specifically designed for children of incarcerated parents, all of which may provide teachers guidance on how to talk to children about incarceration. Teachers can also help children maintain contact with incarcerated parents, perhaps by providing them time and encouragement to create artwork or write letters, as maintaining these relationships may benefit children's well-being.

Children of incarcerated parents may also need emotional support and counseling in school. In addition to collaborating with mental health professionals, such as psychologists and guidance counselors, classroom teachers can help children work through their feelings about parental incarceration and/or connect these students to additional supports.

Schools may also be able to help address the needs of families more generally by making sure that all parents can participate in

school activities, such as parent-teacher conferences, volunteering, and visiting the classroom. Of course, incarcerated parents experience real barriers to their involvement in children's schools and home lives, but teachers can encourage children to talk with their incarcerated parent (via the telephone or in-person visits) about their homework and schooling activities.

The caregivers of these children may also experience difficulties that impede their involvement in children's schools, such as increased family and economic responsibilities. For example, they may have had to increase the number of hours they work to make ends meet, or they may have difficulty finding child care that would allow them to attend school activities, such as open houses or parent-teacher conferences. Teachers can take steps to facilitate parental involvement among all families by keeping all parents informed about opportunities to get involved in their children's



And whereas most children with incarcerated fathers live with their mothers, children with incarcerated mothers have much more varied living arrangements. Grandparents provide care most often, but many arrangements

stress when they return home.

Second, maintaining contact with an incarcerated parent is associated with positive outcomes for children as well as parents, but doing so can be challenging. As

Nonetheless, many incarcerated parents are eager to stay in touch with their children and seize opportunities to do so when they are available. They may also jump back into doing so when they are released.

Third, parental incarceration is just one piece of a larger concern: students are growing up in an era of an expanded criminal justice system that shapes not only their day-to-day lives, but also their perceptions of what is possible for their futures. For middle and high school boys in particular, frequent interactions with police and firsthand knowledge of men in their families and communities who have faced legal troubles or been to prison can cast a shadow over them as they enter adolescence. Research has focused on parental incarceration—for good reason—but even children whose parents are not incarcerated may have brothers, cousins, uncles, or other relatives who are. They may also know people in the community who are not in jail or prison but are on probation or parole or facing new charges.

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In perhaps the most powerful exchange I had with a student while teaching, a young

## It's important to educate all students on the prevalence of incarceration and what it means for families and communities.

exist, including living with other relatives or friends or in foster care.

Because of this, children may find even a mother's return home stressful, as caregiving arrangements are renegotiated. Incarcerated women are also especially likely to cycle in and out of jail quickly and to have histories of mental health challenges and substance abuse. Some children feel responsible for helping to keep their parents safe and may worry and experience

the article on page 22 explains, correctional facilities are often located far from home, and the costs and logistics of travel can make visiting difficult. Phone calls can also be expensive. For children who do visit their parents in prison, correctional facilities' visitation protocols can be intrusive and traumatic. If relationships are strained, children's current caregivers may not want to facilitate communication between their children and an incarcerated parent.



education. And, for parents who do not participate, it is important that teachers not assume that parents do not want to be involved. Instead, these parents may lack the child care or transportation that would make it easier for them to do so. Research increasingly shows that individuals with criminal records avoid community institutions such as schools because of fear that their criminal record will be discovered by the school. School administrators may consider, when appropriate, taking steps to assure parents that they welcome participation among all parents, including those with criminal records.<sup>13</sup>

### Promising Programs

Relatively little is known about existing school-based programs that may help children of incarcerated parents. And even less research exists on if and how these programs improve student outcomes. Although more research would be helpful, two existing programs appear promising.

One such program is POPS (Pain of the Prison System) the Club,\* which may be a model for how to design and deliver services to children affected by parental incarceration. The program began in Venice High School in Los Angeles and has since expanded to seven other high schools in the Los Angeles area, as well as to high schools in an additional four states. POPS gives students the opportunity to come together to share how they have been affected by parental incarceration. The program operates during the school day, usually during lunch, and gives students who may be experiencing the

stigma and shame of having a loved one in jail or prison a space to be open about their struggles and successes. POPS enables students to engage in three types of creative expression:

1. Self-expression, which gives students the opportunity to share their experiences through writing, drawing, photography, and performance;

Teachers can encourage children to talk with their incarcerated parent about their homework and schooling activities.

2. Self-healing, which gives students the opportunity to participate in mindfulness activities; and
3. Community engagement, which allows students to listen to and engage with outside speakers (for example, those who have been touched by the incarceration of a loved one).

In addition to the weekly meetings during the school day, this program also publishes students' literary works on its website. Most students who participate in POPS have experienced the incarceration of a loved one, such as a parent or sibling, and

\*For more about POPS the Club, see [www.popstheclub.com](http://www.popstheclub.com).

man in my class who was quiet and brilliant, and commanded universal respect from his peers, stopped into my classroom after school one day and sat down at a desk. In tears, he shared that his older brother had recently been incarcerated. He told me that he was feeling pressure to take up drug sales to replace his brother's income and keep his family afloat. His sadness was palpable. As he was grieving the loss of his brother—with whom he had shared a room and his daily life—he was facing new challenges brought about by his brother's absence. Fifteen years later, I can't remember exactly what I said to him. I am sure that I conveyed my care and concern for his well-being. Beyond that, what did I say? What *should* I have said or done? What *would* I do now?

Today, I think about returning to the classroom often. If I were to teach again, all that I've learned about parental incarceration—and criminal justice more generally—would inform my teaching practice. In addition to becoming familiar with the statistics on parental incarceration, there are several things I believe teachers and other school staff members can do to better

meet the needs of students with incarcerated parents.

In communities where incarceration is relatively rare, developing knowledge and sensitivity about the issue of incarceration among all students should be prioritized. In these settings, it's important to educate all students on the prevalence of incarceration and what it means for families and communities. Prohibiting jokes about prison and taking care to avoid language and examples that stigmatize are also practices teachers should engage in. And assigning readings that explore the scope of the U.S. criminal justice system can also help students understand the issue. If a student, caregiver, counselor, administrator, or other staff member discloses to you that a student has a parent in jail or prison, take care to ask how much the student knows about the situation (as caregivers sometimes choose to withhold information to protect children) and be certain to protect that student's privacy.

In communities where incarceration is common, recognize the extent of the problem, be mindful of challenging dynamics when engaging with students' families, and consider spearheading

schoolwide efforts to meet the needs of children with incarcerated loved ones. Recognize that many students already have firsthand knowledge of this topic. Understand that the removal or return of a parent or loved one from prison might not be an isolated event, but one in a series spanning long before and after their time in your classroom. Be mindful of potentially challenging relationship dynamics between incarcerated parents and current caregivers.

At times, these relationships are fraught, and it is important to be respectful of all parties. Incorporate opportunities for connection with incarcerated parents into daily curricula. Suggest that students prepare written assignments and artwork with incarcerated loved ones in mind. Discuss with caregivers the feasibility and appropriateness of mailing these items from school. Consider offering resources or clubs targeted toward students who have been affected by prison, including support groups, counseling, and extracurricular activities providing opportunities to process experiences through poetry, writing, arts, and journal writing. Framing these efforts broadly—i.e., as suitable for anyone who

some have experienced their own contact with the criminal justice system.

Like most other school-based programs designed to serve children of incarcerated parents, POPS has not been rigorously evaluated. However, participants of the program say their engagement has given them a space to highlight their challenges and successes. This program also likely reduces stigma among students affected by the criminal justice system and increases the sense of community among them.

Children who have caring adults in their lives are likely to be resilient in the face of challenges such as parental incarceration.

Another program, called Amachi, is run through Big Brothers Big Sisters of America.\* This mentoring program provides guidance and support to children of incarcerated parents by pairing them with a mentor who spends time with them once a week. Amachi is based on the premise that children who have caring adults in their lives are likely to be resilient in the face of challenges such as parental incarceration. Though no rigorous evaluations of the Amachi program exist, some evaluations of Big Brothers Big Sisters find that pairing children with a mentor can have positive educational and behavioral outcomes for children.

Both POPS and Amachi provide concrete ways that schools can support children of incarcerated parents. Some schools may be uniquely positioned to begin similar school-based clubs that can go a long way toward reducing the social stigma of parental incarceration while also providing necessary emotional support. But if the development of such a program is not feasible, teachers and administrators can still work to alleviate the stigma, trauma, and strain experienced by children of incarcerated parents. □

(Endnotes on page 43)

\*For more about the Amachi program, see [www.bbbs.org/amachi](http://www.bbbs.org/amachi).



has an incarcerated loved one or worries about this possibility—may allow for greater participation and connection among students.

In all school types, recognize that many parents are eager to be involved in their children's lives both while they are incarcerated and once they are released. Do what you can to facilitate these connections and meet parents where they are. Do not assume that absences from parent nights and other functions are voluntary. Besides work conflicts and transportation issues, parental incarceration may be an additional reason some parents in your school are not in attendance. If you are in a leadership position, explore innovative ways to include incarcerated parents in education and consider formal partnerships with departments of corrections. For example, it may be possible to facilitate parent-teacher

conferences with incarcerated parents by video, as is currently being done in the state of Washington.<sup>3</sup> And investigate whether there are programs or service providers in your community serving families affected by incarceration, where you can refer students and caregivers for additional support.

Research on children with incarcerated parents has increasingly made clear that parental incarceration does cause children's outcomes to worsen independent of other challenges that may have existed in their lives beforehand. For students who do experience the incarceration of a parent, having access to teachers who share their experiences and who can relate to them can help.

Ideally, teachers and school staff members would have all the time they need to build strong, open relationships with students to engage in conversations

around these issues. But in the world we live in now—with millions of individuals and families touched by prison, and with teachers in many communities less likely than students to have experienced parental incarceration—there is still a lot we can do to provide the supportive, inclusive school communities children with incarcerated loved ones need.\*

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\*For additional resources and tips for educators, see [www.youth.gov/youth-topics/children-of-incarcerated-parents](http://www.youth.gov/youth-topics/children-of-incarcerated-parents).



# Countering Childhood Adversity

As the research in this issue of *American Educator* makes clear, adverse childhood experiences literally change the brain and negatively impact students' abilities to learn. This same research also demonstrates the undeniable power we have as educators to help counter the effects.

While we cannot control much in children's home lives, there is reason for hope. Our students spend a significant amount of time with us in school. From the moment they step foot on school grounds, we have the opportunity to nurture, build up, and even heal our youth who need the most from us.

Even if you don't teach many students who regularly experience adversity at home, it is important to remember that neglect, abuse, and household dysfunction affect all demographics. Chances are there are students suffering in our classrooms, even if we are unaware of the situation at home.

And while this topic may feel overwhelming, Share My Lesson has you covered. Let's explore a few of the amazing resources that can help combat the impact of trauma on children's development.

## Provide a Safe, Nurturing Environment

How nurturing is your classroom? Are students encouraged to take risks and learn from mistakes? Is teasing tolerated or immediately addressed as unacceptable? In the blog post "Make Your Classroom a Safe Place for Students," Share My Lesson contributing author Julia Thompson shares quick tips on making our classrooms safer.

Once we establish safe classrooms, we can take steps to ensure all students' voices are valued and heard. Check out Amber Chandler's blog post "Be Seen. Be Heard. Be Known: Mentoring Students to Use Their Voices." Asking students to contribute in class can counter the effects of neglect. Let's make sure each child feels he or she is a valued and contributing member of our schools.

We can help students navigate difficult situations with resources from an entire collection dedicated to "Helping Children Cope with Traumatic Events." One such resource is "Healing Gestures," demonstrating precise ways to reach out to students and counter the impact of trauma.

## Bring on the Joy

There is reason to believe in the old adage that laughter can cure many ailments. How joyful is your classroom? How often do you all let out big belly laughs together? A webinar called "Let's Have Fun" shows positive ways to build social and emotional learning into literacy lessons.

Another resource, "Building a Joyful Learning Environment," includes tips and a self-reflection tool to help us consider areas that could be improved, such as using the physical space of our rooms to support learning and positive classroom culture.

## Increase Order and Predictability

We can do a lot with routines and structures in our schools to counter the effects of the pain and distress our children may

face outside of school. While we want to increase joy, which can include the element of surprise, we also want students to know what to expect from their daily schedules.

For the brain that has experienced trauma, daily rituals and predictable patterns in schedules can be powerful ways to assure and calm heightened nervous systems. Our "Classroom Management and Teaching Strategies" mega collection contains more than 600 lessons and other resources for taking your classroom environment to the next level. Topics include bullying prevention, internet safety, restorative discipline practices, and more! There is also a whole collection of webinars on building a healthy school climate, so be sure to share this with your administrators, paraprofessionals, and other essential support staff at your school.

Finally, explore our partner profiles and pages for more free resources. The American Psychological Association, for example, has shared more than 20 lesson plans and articles that help teachers use the power of science and psychology to improve learning and well-being in schools.

The resources here are excellent for *all* students, even those unaffected by trauma. All people need connection, safety, play, and predictability to learn well and to thrive. We hope you find tools here that empower you to continue your great work with our children. If you have additional ideas or requests, please reach out to us at [content@sharemylesson.com](mailto:content@sharemylesson.com).

—THE SHARE MY LESSON TEAM

## Recommended Resources

**Make Your Classroom a Safe Place for Students**  
<http://go.aft.org/ae219sml1>

**Be Seen. Be Heard. Be Known: Mentoring Students to Use Their Voices**  
<http://go.aft.org/ae219sml2>

**Helping Children Cope with Traumatic Events**  
<http://go.aft.org/ae219sml3>

**Changing Minds Now: Healing Gestures**  
<http://go.aft.org/ae219sml4>

**Let's Have Fun: Ways to Integrate Social-Emotional Learning into Your Literacy Lessons**  
<http://go.aft.org/ae219sml5>

**Building a Joyful Learning Environment**  
<http://go.aft.org/ae219sml6>

**Classroom Management and Teaching Strategies**  
<http://go.aft.org/ae219sml7>

**American Psychological Association**  
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