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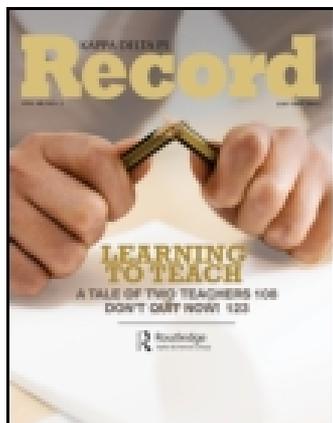
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10 Strategies to Help the Traumatized Child in School

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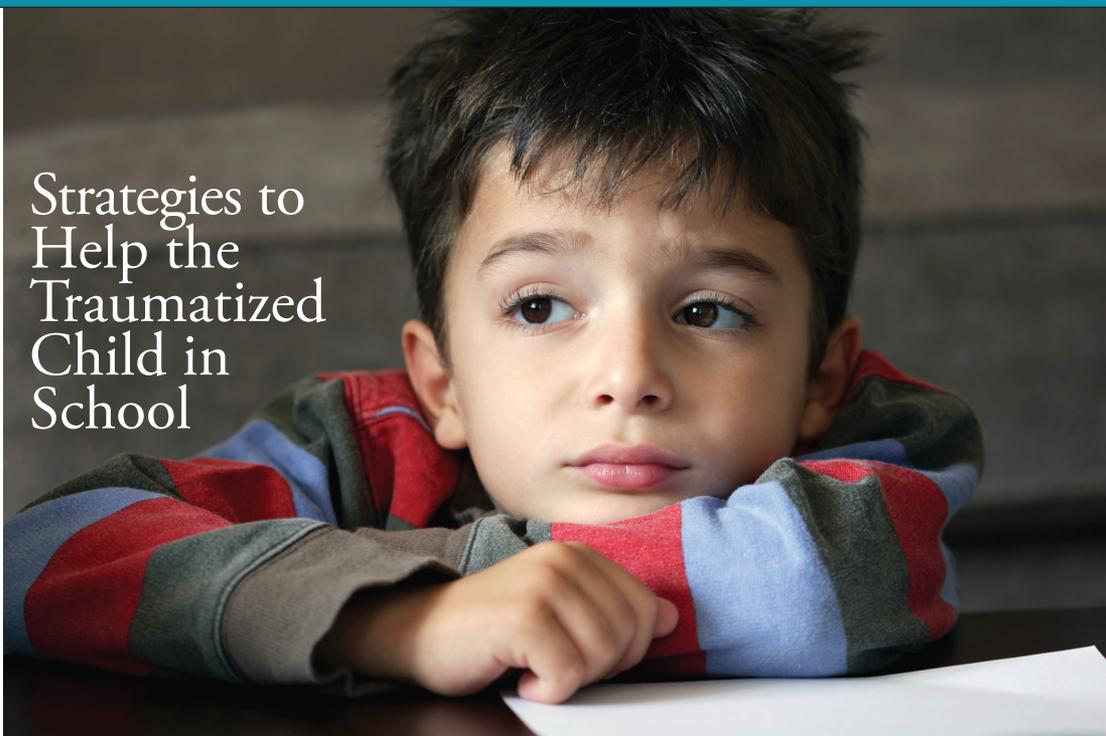
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Traumatized Children

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10 Strategies to Help the Traumatized Child in School

by Colleen Lelli



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Abstract

After children have witnessed domestic violence, the lingering trauma can undermine their ability to learn and succeed in school. With the right classroom strategies, however, teachers can help students relieve stress, reengage in the curriculum, stay focused and organized, attend to tasks, and reestablish relationships.

Key words: teacher education/certification, elementary education, special education, early childhood education

Domestic violence is a serious and widespread national problem that affects all economic, educational, social, geographic, racial, ethnic, and regional groups (Keeping Children and Families Safe Act of 2003; Rennison, 2003). While living in their own homes, children are witnessing violence and experiencing trauma daily and, in turn, are expected to go to school and learn. Trauma, however, can undermine children's ability to learn; further, children exposed to trauma are likely to have difficulty forming healthy relationships (Barrett-Kruse, Martinez, & Carll, 1998; Cole et al., 2005; Fantuzzo, Stevenson, Weiss, Hampton, & Noone, 1997; Haeseler, 2006; Kearney, 1999; Spath, 2003). Yet another

challenge arises because family violence, including domestic violence, is frequently undisclosed by school personnel; therefore, children often are misdiagnosed with other learning issues while at school (Cole et al., 2005). Teachers need to watch for possible warning signs that children may have witnessed domestic violence and be prepared with appropriate teaching strategies.

Teachers need to be familiar with the challenges traumatized children are facing, and they need to employ strategies and tools to help them learn. Specific challenges are identified here, followed by 10 ways teachers can help students who have witnessed domestic violence or who have been impacted by trauma be successful in the classroom.

Effects of Domestic Violence

Domestic violence adversely affects not only those being abused, but also children who witness the violence. These children have been called the *silent*, *forgotten*, and *unintended* victims of adult-to-adult domestic violence (Edelson, 1999a, 1999b). Succeeding in school poses a huge hurdle for children who have witnessed domestic violence. Shonk and Cicchetti (2001) found that neglected children and children who

have witnessed domestic violence show more severe academic problems than do children in the general population. They also found that maltreated children are more likely to receive special educational services, have below-grade-level achievement test scores, be retained in grade, and be rated by teachers as showing poor work habits. Elevated academic failure was found to be common for maltreated students, which in turn put them at risk for dropping out of school (Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001).

As Masten and Coatsworth (1998) pointed out, prerequisites for excelling in the classroom include the ability to self-regulate attention, emotions, and behavior. Children exposed to domestic violence are at dire risk for not being able to cope with threatening and harmful situational issues that may be manifested in the school classroom, such as working through disagreements with classmates or peers (Haeseler, 2006). Language and communication skills, organizing narrative material, cause-and-effect relationships, attending to classroom tasks, processing verbal information, and engaging in the curriculum all can be hampered for a child exposed to domestic violence (Cole et al., 2005).

Allen and Oliver (1982) found a significant correlation between child neglect and deficits in both receptive and expressive language. If a child is neglected, then he or she hasn't had as many opportunities to develop verbal problem-solving skills. Thus, children exposed to domestic violence may struggle to extract key ideas found in lengthy narratives (Coster & Cicchetti, 1993).

Traumatic experiences can hinder a student's ability to organize material sequentially and lead to problems in reading, writing, and oral communication (Cole et al., 2005; De Bellis, 2005). Early in life, children begin to remember experiences and information episodically as a collection of events rather than a narrative (Craig, 2008). When children have consistent environments, they develop the capacity to remember things sequentially and then encode new information within the context of prior

experience. Children exposed to violence often are deprived of the types of caregiving experiences that nourish the development of sequential memory. Because the development of sequential memory is delayed and the ability to sequentially remember new information is impaired, students witnessing domestic violence will flounder with organizing and processing the content of academic lessons for later retrieval and application (Craig, 2008; De Bellis, 2005).

Children who have witnessed domestic violence also are challenged in regulating emotions, which can lead to the inability to form relationships with peers (Cole et al., 2005; Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001). Children who are socially withdrawn have limited problem-solving skills. Many times, peers will reject these withdrawn children as well as children who are aggressive in nature (Cole et al., 2005; Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001). Maltreated children are more likely to (a) respond inappropriately to peer provocations, (b) have trouble understanding others' feelings, and (c) lack awareness of the effect of one's own behavior on others (Shonk & Cicchetti, 2001).

The following strategies are not meant to be sequential, but are 10 overall suggestions for a teacher to try in the classroom to foster a positive learning experience for a child who has witnessed domestic violence in the home.

1. Sequencing Strategies

Traumatic experiences can hinder a student's ability to organize material sequentially, leading to problems in areas such as reading, writing, and oral communication (Allen & Oliver, 1982). A strategy for teachers is to instruct children to verbally discuss the sequential process to improve critical thinking skills (Norton & Land, 2008).

Timelines are excellent tools for teaching students to sequence events. Comic strips, for example, are a great way to teach students sequencing; to use this strategy, cut each frame of the comic strip and have students place the frames in the correct order. At times, children have difficulty remembering stories episodically. Reversing the order of events in familiar stories

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will help children with the concept of sequencing (Lelli, 2012). For example, asking students to verbalize sequentially from the end to the beginning of the story, versus sequencing from the beginning to the end of the story, will help a student have better success with story and reading comprehension.

Children who have witnessed domestic violence also will benefit from classrooms in which there are orderly transitions and clear rules that help students organize their tasks (Cole et al., 2005; Craig, 2008).

2. Problem-Solving Strategies

Students who live with caregivers that are inconsistent and unpredictable may struggle to apply problem-solving strategies (Haeseler, 2006). Verbal problem-solving skills are a struggle for children traumatized by domestic violence, which can make looking at problems from another's perspective challenging. An effective strategy is to engage students in brainstorming activities to reinforce problem-solving techniques. The teacher can develop a list of possible problem-solving options with the student, and then the student can decide which solution is the best option when faced with a problem.

Another useful strategy is making predictions before and during reading. Students can take a "picture walk" and make predictions about the story's outcome. With teacher support, students can create a concept map with their predictions. At the end of the story, students can compare their initial predictions with what actually happened in the story.

3. Receptive Language Strategies

Children exposed to violence will have great difficulty with receptive language, especially in the school setting. These children typically have a heightened state of arousal or anxiety, and this limits their ability to process and respond to classroom language (Craig, 2008). Additionally, their struggle to engage in perspective taking and comprehend inferences adds to their difficulty interpreting receptive language.

Focusing on the reading task, including making connections with the text, can also be challenging. Visualizing what they are reading is virtually impossible for traumatized children, and interactions with the author's meaning are limited. Traumatic

experiences can hinder a student's ability to organize and complete reading assignments.

For children who struggle with receptive language, using visual task cards can help them follow directions. Students can turn over each card as they complete the given task. Another aid can be assigning the weekly job of "summarizer" to one student in the class. This student is given the responsibility of orally summarizing the directions given throughout the day, which will greatly help traumatized children understand assignments and stay on task.

4. Expressive Language Strategies

Children affected by domestic violence oftentimes have not lived in a home where expressive language is practiced or valued (Cecil, 2004). These children may have difficulty effectively expressing their feelings, which can make some expressive language strategies difficult to use. As such, writing also may be challenging as an extension of their inability to express themselves verbally. Students generally struggle with writing because writing requires organizing thoughts and sequencing information (see strategy 1 regarding sequencing).

To help students with their expressive language skills, including speaking and writing, use graphic organizers to structure information (Lelli, 2012). Graphic organizers can be given to the student, and the teacher can scaffold learning of how to use the graphic organizers effectively. Another strategy is to provide students with words they can use in their speaking and writing to resolve problems and solve conflicts (Craig, 2008). Also helpful for writing instruction is to provide students with a picture of a famous painting and have them fill in speech bubbles to describe what is happening.

5. Information Storage Strategies

To be stored in the brain, information must enter implicitly or explicitly (De Bellis, 2005). *Implicit memory* is unconscious and includes information such as step-by-step procedures that a person does without thinking, for example,

brushing teeth. *Explicit memory* is conscious and includes information such as parts of an event or situation and the context in which it occurred. For example, not only does a person remember the event, but he or she also may recall the context in which the event occurred, that is, the time of day, the place, and other objects and people that were present. Children who have witnessed domestic violence may remember when and where domestic violence took place, or a particular smell may remind them of a terrible event.

The use of concept maps is one strategy that will help students recall important information and connect key ideas. Another strategy is taking a multisensory approach that will help students remember and store information more easily. For example, when studying plants, have students read a story about plants, perform a play about seeds sprouting into plants, actually plant seeds, and observe the seed turning into a plant. Using concept maps and a multisensory approach will support students in remembering and retaining information implicitly and explicitly.

6. Memory Retrieval Strategies

Students in school are expected to retrieve facts, decode words, and spell with automaticity. Two primary memory channels are used to retrieve knowledge: recall and recognition (Craig, 2008). *Recall* is the ability to retrieve a skill or fact automatically and can be challenging for traumatized children who have high distractibility and low tolerance for frustration. When students have trouble with recall in school, the situation can produce high anxiety. *Recognition* is the ability to discriminate between important and unimportant information. Children who live in traumatic environments often have difficulty recognizing patterns, which is an essential skill for recognition.

Creating a classroom with positive learning environments will increase long-term memory storage by freeing up space in the working memory previously occupied by anxiety and worries about safety (Levine, 2002). Children who have witnessed domestic violence may

benefit from a positive learning environment which includes instruction that links music and movement. When introducing a new topic to students, another strategy to enhance recall and recognition is to have students brainstorm terms and concepts connected to the topic; then place students in groups to develop 10 words they feel are related.

7. Emotional and Behavioral Strategies

Children who have witnessed domestic violence can have difficulty expressing their feelings, controlling their emotions, and regulating their behavior. Experiences with inconsistent or abusive caregivers make explaining their various emotional states difficult for them. Traumatized children often are chronically tense and consistently hyper-aroused, which makes them overly sensitive to perceptions of threat or danger (Craig, 2008). These feelings leave children with immense problems self-regulating their behaviors.

Strategies for guiding children to self-regulate their own behaviors could include:

- Rehearse and role play with students to help them practice self-talk and the behaviors they will emulate in new situations.
- Teach a mnemonic strategy to encourage children to think before acting. For example, Craig (2008) suggested, STOP: S-sshh, T-think quiet thoughts to calm down, O-organize a plan, and P-practice your plan.
- Provide children with a safe place to cool down and think through their thoughts if they are upset.

8. Focus and Attention Strategies

Children who are exposed to violence are hypervigilant to danger. Past traumatic experiences involving unpredictable or dangerous situations interfere with their ability to sustain attention in the classroom; therefore learning anything new can be a constant struggle (Craig, 2008). To help students focus and attend in the classroom, incorporate physical activities and movement

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during lessons. Giving both written and oral directions also will help them focus because more than one learning modality is being used. Stress management techniques, such as deep breathing, stretching exercises, and yoga movements, can help all students in the classroom to focus.

9. Sense of Security Strategies

Children who experience neglect or abuse can feel insecure about their attachments to caregivers. They may be frightened by their parents' own expressions of fear and dissociative behaviors, and worried about the availability of those who care for them (Solomon & Siegel, 2003). The trauma and inconsistency of the home environment can make a student feel on edge, anxious, and unable to focus on the content of the classroom lessons.

Before the student can learn effectively, he or she needs to feel a sense of security in the classroom. Providing consistency in the routine of the classroom and establishing clear expectations while enforcing classroom rules is one strategy that can be used to provide children of trauma with a sense of security in the classroom. Focusing on the strengths of the student and providing a multiple intelligence approach toward achievement is another way to facilitate learning through the most appropriate means.

10. Collaboration Strategies

Collaboration is pivotal in ensuring that students get the necessary supports and advocates working with them to attend to their needs. Guidance counselors, social workers, and community partners should collaborate and work as a team to ensure that children are receiving the best help and support for their academic and emotional success. Insights from these professionals can assist in shaping teaching methods that address individual learning needs.

Teachers need to know their school policies and protocols, and build relationships with other colleagues in their schools and communities. Also, educators should become familiar with community resources and

agencies that may be beneficial to students' learning and development (Lelli, 2012).

Closing Thoughts

Teachers need to be able to identify a child who may be witnessing domestic violence and to know appropriate strategies to help successful learning in the classroom. Faculty development should be provided for all members of the school community. With proper school intervention, children who witness abuse can cultivate healthy relationships (Kearney, 1999). Teachers and other school personnel can use various strategies to help these children become successful members of their school community. ■

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