

Returning to School after a Traumatic Event

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As long as humankind has existed, there have been traumas. It is how people respond to traumatic events that can make a significant difference in whether they recover with resiliency or remain permanently injured by their experiences.

Young people are particularly vulnerable to the impact of trauma because of their development levels and the presence or absence of a solid support system in their lives. The right kind of support can make a dramatic difference, not only in how they cope with a traumatic event, but in their perspective going forward in life.

By definition, traumas are unexpected and sudden events that cause intense harm emotionally and, at times, even physically. A young person who experiences a traumatic incident feels a deep sense of helplessness and fear, at least at the onset of the event. Over time, however, how they process and react to the trauma and how they express the ongoing effects of their distress depends on many dynamics, including factors such as:

- their age and level of development
- the supports they have (or do not have) in their lives
- their closeness (in proximity and/or relationship) to the event
- other mental health issues, such as depression or anxiety
- individual differences in temperament
- prior traumatic experiences.

These variables impact whether a young person grows and gets stronger or is challenged in his/her ability to recover.

Trauma comes in many forms

The school shootings in Chardon this past February brought our worst fears of trauma and violence involving our children to life; however, there are many types of traumatic events that touch the lives of children everywhere and every day. These include experiences such as

- witnessing or experiencing an unexpected death
- the suicide of a close family member or significant loss of a loved one
- domestic violence or abuse
- involvement in a severe accident.

Sadly, more children than we like to think are impacted by traumatic experiences. And because these events affect so many aspects of their functioning, returning to school following a traumatic experience can be very difficult.

The impact of trauma on children

When children do have an experience that overwhelms their ability to cope effectively, they may have ongoing feelings of concern for their safety and ability to trust others. Preoccupation with what happened is common, as they continue to think about their actions and try to integrate residual feelings of guilt or shame about what they did or did not do. Emotionally and behaviorally, children may become more easily dysregulated, either overreacting to things or becoming more constricted and withdrawn than before. Sleeping and eating patterns may change as well.

These changes are actually hardwired into the brain to help children survive their stressful experiences; however, in our modern world, and especially in school, this may impact our children's capacity to learn. Their ability to concentrate, focus, organize and retain new learning may be highly compromised as they seek to adjust to their new normal. And when the school itself is associated with the trauma, there may be even greater disruptions due to high levels of emotional distress of all the students and faculty. All of this adds to the potential for disruptive behaviors and loss of attendance unless we make a concerted effort to reach out to students and provide them with extra support.

As we noted earlier in this article, there are many variables that affect how a person reacts to and copes with trauma, based on their personal dynamics. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (<http://www.nctsn.org>) is an excellent source of information about the impact of trauma on children and recommends watching for these signs to determine if a child is experiencing serious problems.

- **Preschoolers:** Has the child recently lost developmental skills previously acquired or regressed to simpler speech and habits (thumb sucking or clinging)? Because young children have less capacity for expressing their feelings and needs through words, their symptoms are more likely to come out through their behaviors and problems in their physical functioning, such as sleep issues (being afraid to sleep or having nightmares) and being more irritable or aggressive.
- **Elementary School Students:** Children in this age group are more likely to show their distress through somatic reactions such as headaches, stomachaches or other pains. It is important to understand that they are

not making up these symptoms, but actually experiencing these discomforts on a physical level. They may have an increase in angry or aggressive behaviors or be more inconsistent in how they react to things in general. This is an age where they may talk more excessively about the traumatic event as well. School work particularly may suffer as maintaining attention and organizing themselves can be more difficult.

- **Middle and High School Students:** These students are more likely to feel self-conscious about their emotional responses to what has occurred. They may experience heightened feelings, especially in regards to emotions related to guilt, shame or wanting to retaliate. This is an age when young people are developing their capacity for deeper thinking, and this kind of experience can significantly alter their world view and their sense of who they are in the world. It is a time when youth may exhibit more high-risk behaviors such as using drugs, engaging in other reckless or self-harming activities, getting into more arguments and fights, or becoming more withdrawn. There may be a shift in their interpersonal relationships with family members, teachers and classmates. These students may show a change in their school performance, attendance and behavior.

While any or all of these reactions can be expected, every child will respond in his/her unique way. These symptoms may be present and then dissipate, only to resurface at a later time because of some reminder of the trauma. While there is often a wish for and pressure to “move on and get over this,” this reaction does not help children who are struggling to integrate their experiences.

Helping children overcome a traumatic event

What does help is recognizing that these reactions are normal for a person who has gone through an abnormal situation.

- Keep in mind that traumatic events are pretty rare in the overall scheme of life and try to maintain that perspective, for both yourself and your child.
- Know that children can and will recover in time and that these experiences do not have to be damaging forever. In fact, research shows that children who are given support to successfully work through traumatic experiences often end up being deeper, more compassionate and helpful than many of their peers.
- Actively listening and validating the child’s experience goes a long way in helping them integrate and promote their healing. You do not want to overreact or underreact to the symptoms the child or youth may be presenting. If a child is exhibiting problems regulating their emotions and behaviors, hear out the feelings that are being expressed and connect this to what may be driving the behaviors or how they may be connected to the trauma.

- As much as possible, maintain basic rules and routines because this helps children know what to expect and ultimately gives them a sense of control and safety. If a child is highly resistant to returning to school, it might be helpful to make a plan with small steps that will help the child face what he/she is most afraid of about returning and then help him/her take those steps. If this is too complicated, it may be wise to seek mental health support to help the child working through his/her avoidance and fears successfully.

Be aware of your own past traumas

This is also an important time to reflect on one's own life experiences. If there are unresolved traumatic experiences in your past, it may make your reactions to the child's situation even more intense. It is always a good idea to take a step back and do what you need to do to take care of yourself. If necessary, continue working on your own healing journey so that you can provide the best possible help for the children in your care.

"You cannot push the river" is an old saying that speaks to how important it is to understand that the course of recovery is not a linear process that one can simply move through and be done with. It is essential to understand that each person will do this in his/her own time and own way and to respect and accept this process; however, if you are concerned that the symptoms and reactions to the traumatic event are continuing for a prolonged period of time or that the reactions seem to be too intense, it is a good idea to seek an assessment to see if counseling might be beneficial.

For more information about Trauma-Informed Care at Beech Brook, contact Kate Biddle, Assistant Vice President of Clinical Services, at kbiddle@beechbrook.org, call 216.831.2255 (toll free 877.546.1225), or visit our website at www.beechbrook.org.