Becoming a Trauma Informed School



elearning.creativeeducation.co.uk

creative EDUCATION

Introduction

Betsy de Thierry, a qualified psychotherapist and primary school teacher, founded the Trauma Recovery Centre and is the author of the 'Simple Guide to Child Trauma'. We asked Betsy to explain why it's important for schools to become trauma informed, and what practical steps they could take.

Becoming a trauma informed school is vital because we now recognise that one in three diagnosed mental health problems in adulthood are known to directly relate to childhood traumatic experiences. A trauma informed school is a school that has chosen to learn how to respond to those children who have experienced trauma in a way that reduces the short-term and long-term impact on their wellbeing.

Defining Trauma

Trauma impacts a child's behaviour, learning, emotions, relationships and memory. Trauma can be defined as any experience where a child feels simultaneously terrified and powerless and is unable to immediately experience comfort and safety from an adult who can help them make sense of the overwhelming experience. Here are some other definitions:

A psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience, often involving a sense of intense fear, terror and helplessness.' (Perry, 2006).

'Trauma happens when any experience stuns us like a bolt out of the blue; it overwhelms us, leaving us altered and disconnected from our bodies. Any coping mechanisms we may have had are undermined, and we feel utterly helpless and hopeless. It is as if our legs are knocked out from under us.' (Levine, 2006)



Trauma Symptoms

Trauma symptoms can vary from aggression, emotional volatility, self-harm, wetting and soiling, being withdrawn, being compliant, angry outbursts, running out of the classroom, having panic attacks, being overly clingy with an adult, not being able to engage in learning, day dreamy and agitated.

Children can recover from the impact of trauma when they feel emotionally safe and connected to an adult who enables them to process the experience.

Trauma cannot be processed through words as the area of the brain responsible for thinking and reflection (the pre-frontal cortex) and the area of the brain responsible for speech and language (the Broca's area) has reduced neural activity and essentially 'goes offline' because the brain becomes focused on surviving the threat and terror.

Communication?

We know that behaviour is communication. The acting out behaviour such as aggression, disruption and volatility or the acting in behaviour such as self-loathing, being withdrawn or not focusing on learning, all tell us that the child has needs that are not being met.

Adults in schools can provide warm, genuine, consistent, caring, kind, nurturing relationships that can help a traumatized child feel emotionally safe, which can lead to them feeling less overwhelmed.

This in turn leads them to be less dysregulated in their behaviour because they know how and who they can turn to when they need help with a sense of sudden overwhelm in their emotions or nervous system where the impact of trauma resides.

Traumed Informed School

A trauma informed school culture makes sure that adults never ask ‘what’s wrong with this child’ but always ask ‘what happened for them to behave like this?”

Trauma recovery focused work is a step further and requires specialist help to enable the traumatized child to fully process their experience. This enables them to be able to live a life where the traumatic experience no longer impacts their every day.

Practical Steps

-1-

Make sure the whole school (including lunchtime staff and admin staff) have been trained and envisioned to understand that behaviour is communication and disruptive, challenging behaviour is usually a child with an unmet need.

-2-

Make sure all adults remember to ask ‘what has happened to them’ rather than ‘what’s wrong with them’ and then take time to reflect so that empathy is a strong adult approach.

-3-

Make sure that all staff are helped to be aware of how children show trauma symptoms so that a traumatized child can be identified by their behaviour and reactions and we are not dependent on knowing their story.



Practical Steps

-4-

Create a school culture where blame and shame are not a natural response but rather empathy, kindness and curiosity. From adults to the children and adults to adults.

-5-

Create a behaviour policy that is not based on a child being able to reflect and be rational when they are overwhelmed, but recognizes that a traumatized child needs time with a safe adult to be slowly learn how to reflect and understand consequences. Reward and punishment behaviour policies and practices create increased stress and escalation of overwhelm for traumatized children.

-6-

Despite budget restraints, having staff trained and available to be the safe adults in a school and ready for a traumatized child to need to be with them, reduces cost in the long term.



Practical Steps

-7-

Helping all children understand the impact of trauma on humans. Teaching them the physiological response to terror and how it can make us all have ‘muddled brains’ can reduce bullying and frustration and instead help children develop empathy and kindness which leads to short and long term healthy communities.

-8-

Have calm, safe and sensory areas for anyone to access when they feel overwhelmed. I assure you that healthy children won’t want to be there after a short while as they would rather learn!

-9-

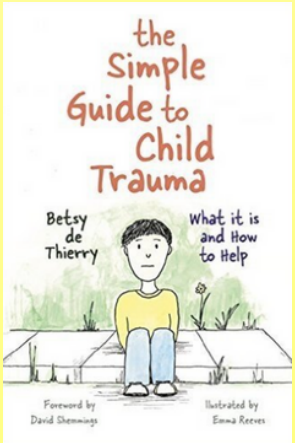
Invest into supporting parents and communicating without shame and blame so that they can inform the school of information that enables the staff to help the children with their overwhelm and fear.



Practical Steps

-10-

Provide books and training regularly to enable teachers realize what an extraordinary role they have, how they are changing lives and how they need to look after themselves as they look after the children in their care.



Betsy de Thierry MA Counselling and Psychotherapy and B.Ed (hons) Primary Education More can be found in 'Teaching the Child on the Trauma Continuum' (2015) Grosvenor Publishing and 'The Simple Guide to Child trauma'. (2016) Jessica Kingsley Publishing and www.trc-uk.org


Helpful?
Tweet us @CreativeEdu with what worked well
elearning.creativeeducation.co.uk
creative
EDUCATION