

# From Home to School: Relearning



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The transition into the COVID-19 pandemic forced many households across the U.S. to quarantine together. Since they are spending so much time in close-quarters with their guardians, children may face traumatic events which they would normally use their school environment to escape from. However, schools across the nation have also transformed their role by providing learning remotely.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network defines childhood trauma as frightening, dangerous or violent events that may occur or be witnessed in a child's life that may cause a threat to life itself. Examining the effects of traumatic events a child may endure early in life can be a precursor to halted development seen later in life. These disturbances in development can be exhibited by the child's functioning in school, social life and later troubles in adulthood, where it is natural to have more daily stressors. Examining the biological and cognitive-behavioral development of traumatized versus non-traumatized children, can further provide an understanding of how these events cause an abnormal psychological change, and can aid in selecting solutions that can facilitate recovery.

The most studied biological stress system is the limbic-hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (LHPA); this system involves the interaction between the limbic, hypothalamus and pituitary structures of the brain and the adrenal glands of the endocrine system. Authors Connie Allen and Valerie Harper of "Anatomy and Physiology 6th Edition," provide that the adrenal glands play the role of releasing adrenocorticotrophic hormone (ACTH), which stimulates the secretion of cortisol. Other hormones such as corticotropin-releasing hormone (CRH) signal the adrenal glands to release in times of stress. According to the National Institute of Health, elevated levels of CRH occur within the onset of traumatic events. Although it has been determined that CRH secretions generally elevate into adulthood, initial starting levels of ACTH and cortisol can result in higher levels of CRH at baseline to be met due to chronic exposures.

This finding suggests that certain children who are chronically exposed to stressful events adapt to re-regulate their body's response to the stress and prevent physical harm. Children who are met with traumatic events in everyday life already have an elevated CRH level, in contrast to children who do not experience the effects

of stress as often. Due to the overstimulation of the body's stress response, the brain can also begin to display the consequences from traumatic events.

Dr. Todd Thatcher of Highland Springs Health Clinic informs that in parts of the amygdala, the hippocampus and prefrontal cortex are hyperactive in traumatized children. According to Thatcher, studies have been shown that people with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) have an overall smaller hippocampal volume than others who have not been affected by trauma chronically. Due to the increased activity of the amygdala and prefrontal cortex, emotions such as fear, anxiety and irritation are seen more often as the brain perceives danger or threat.

It is often said that hardships in life make a person "age." Neuroscientist Bruce McEwen has sought out the answer to this question. In "Physiology and Neurobiology of Stress and Adaptation: Central Role of the Brain," McEwen explains that early life experiences have an even greater impact on how an individual reacts to new situations in life. Living with cold and uncaring families produces long-lasting emotional problems for children. These effects may be seen in overall brain structure, thus increasing the risk of depression and PTSD later in life. This discovery has further been applied to the study of childhood trauma.

According to the National Institute of Health, the increasing load of childhood stressors heightens a child's vulnerability to impacts of stress. As children are exposed to traumatic events at an early age, the impacts may go unnoticed until early adulthood. Certain children can be distant and appear independent. As they refrain from interacting with their peers, this sense of isolation may have been exhibited during the initial time of stress. The sense of isolation during the actual event of trauma gave the child the sense of safety and relief. This habit can further go unnoticed—or may not even appear abnormal—to the child themselves.

There are many cases portrayed in movies, TV shows and documentaries of children who are able to become successful after chronic exposure to traumatic events. Likewise, there are also children who have a harder time adjusting to a normal life in adulthood due to the same reasons. According to the Institute for Attachment and Child Development, early attachment bonding between a child and caregiver can be a major factor regarding why certain children can go unaffected by traumatic events. The lack of attachment between a caregiver and a child results in learning survival behaviors that show an insecure form of attachment; the most at risk children for mental illnesses come from parents displaying a disorganized-disoriented parent attachment.

# Relationships After Childhood Trauma

In this attachment, children are exposed to their caregiver and this has unpredictable, frightening and out of control effects. As expressed by Institute for Attachment and Child Development, children who grow up in this environment are conditioned to distrust all relationships and often isolate themselves from others. In some cases, children who deal with the loss of one parent do not necessarily fall through the cracks of substance abuse, mental illness or behavior problems at school. The strong supportive attachment between the single parent can still provide the child a sense of security. Fostering the idea of early attachment between the child and caregiver suggests that resilience can be seen differently in traumatized and non-traumatized children.

Early detection of a child going through troubles at home may be seen in their behaviors displayed at school. Traumatized children exhibit behaviors that often reflect an insecure persona. The inability of forming relationships with their teachers and an overall pattern of negative thinking prevents a child from having a sense of belonging and positivity.

The conditioned defense mechanisms that the child has grown up using for a sense of safety from stressful events at home are displayed in the classroom as well. A study from Antioch University in Santa Barbara observed these mechanisms in the classroom, which include talking back to the teacher, tardiness, incomplete assignments and lack of attention. One of the major challenges in the school system is that this misbehavior is wrongly interpreted; in the current system, rather than addressing the problem of why a child is acting differently, disciplinary actions are taken that withdraw attention and support from the child. The level of patience is often low between a school professional and a student at this time. However, it is crucial to consider that children who are suspended from school are often sent back to unideal home environments.

Dr. Nancy Rappaport, associate professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, expresses the importance of schools' efforts to work on changing behaviors in troubled children rather than suspending them. The communication and acknowledgement of emotions with children can prevent them from being alienated, and not be driven away from adults who are trying to help them.

The gateway to incarceration may even begin with a first time referral. The well-known cycle named the "school-to-prison-pipeline" examines the path that students can be pushed down, when leaving classroom discipline and becoming more vulnerable to the outside environment and juvenile correction system. Further, with the lack of a support system at home, children are left alone to find solutions to their problems. The environment surrounding the child may also steer their development to become stunted from exposure to substance abuse and gang violence.

Antioch University's research suggests that

introducing trauma-informed education and practices, such as mindfulness, in schools can make a positive impact on child behavior. The state of California has put these new findings to the test across many school systems. According to EdSource journalist David Washburn, a \$15 million reform bill was passed in 2018, in effort to eliminate policies that cause students to be suspended. Instead, schools are to develop programs that allow for screening and intervention for potentially traumatized children. This form of advocacy further supports the idea from Rappaport that troubled children should be given support on changing their behaviors, rather than be disciplined. By moving away from disciplinary strategies to a comforting supportive system, troubled children should not feel alienated from the school system and the overall justice system at such an early age.

As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, children are vulnerable to new and worsening mental illnesses. Americans have varying school choices, from public to private and co-ed to single gender schools, and accessibility to mental health resources may also be different. Childhood trauma can be a sensitive topic to discuss in the school setting, however having no conversation only fuels greater stigmatizations.

According to the Treatment and Services Adaptation Center, schools may benefit from a trauma-informed structural setting. In this setting, facilities in the school community are prepared to recognize and respond to those who have been impacted by traumatic stress. Those adults include administrators, teachers, staff, counselors and social workers. These measures can be done through student assessments, observing school behavior and one-on-one mentoring. Students are provided with clear expectations and communication strategies to guide them through stressful situations. The outcome of this structure not only provides tools to cope with extreme situations, but creates an underlying culture of respect and support in the school. In cases where children do not feel comfortable to discuss their circumstances at home, one's school can become a place of security.

The child welfare system in the U.S. manifests the role that with helpful, responsible adults in a child's life, children can and will recover from their circumstances. Schools can become safe havens for children to foster and allow for support from adults who are able to recognize and respond to various childhood circumstances. By initiating healthy relationships in schools, children can feel more secure from stressors at home, social environment, peers and more. The cycle of childhood trauma can be broken in future generations to help foster a secure path for recovery.