

Chapter 1

Adverse Childhood Experiences: How Incidents From the Past Affect a Student's Classroom Behavior Today

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ABSTRACT

Childhood trauma is as American as apple pie. The statistics are sobering. In 2018, more than 673,000 children were victims of abuse or neglect. This chapter will explore adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) in detail, relating how these past experiences could affect current student behavior. A case study will be used to illustrate the issues that teachers face in their classrooms. Research shows that trauma affects the brain and subsequently how people act and/or react. Emotional regulation, behavioral control, and cognitive processes that are affected by trauma will be explored. Further, this chapter will raise the issues of racial disproportionality in identification and labeling of behavioral disorders and recommendations for special education among students who may have been exposed to trauma. Lastly, recommendations for best practice will be outlined to support educators in the field.

INTRODUCTION

All too soon, a familiar din of excitement will fill the halls of every elementary, middle, and high school across this country. It is the first day of school! The murmur of little voices, clamoring to meet their teachers and select seats near their friends reaches a fever pitch. The clanging of lockers and the shuffling of feet in the halls echoes as if in symphony. The flipping of book pages and grumbles about schedules keeps the time. All of this chatter is welcomed by educators and perhaps, even expected. What has also come to be expected by many, are the shouts of an escalated child and the pleas by their teacher. The tossing of chairs or schoolwork, and the requests for assistance over the intercom have also become a familiar refrain. Sadly, even calls to parents requesting behavioral assistance or worse, school security, are commonplace in some school communities. Despite districts' efforts to provide professional development around classroom management and effective disciplinary practices, educators are still left feeling

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dejected and helpless in the face of rising behavioral challenges in the classroom. In fact, educators are leaving the profession amid these behavioral challenges, citing this misbehavior as a cause and a result of the high teacher turnover rates (Marinell & Coca, 2013).

What is worse, is that many of these teachers are blaming themselves. Teachers are putting an unrealistic charge upon themselves to be someone who they are not, to “engage” students who may experience difficulties in self-regulation. While trying to be witty or funny or “current”, some teachers are missing the mark of being their authentic selves and showing up as they are to help children meet their educational and behavioral milestones. To appear culturally competent, some teachers are making up elaborate handshakes and learning rap lyrics and wondering why students are still misbehaving in class. When all the gimmicks have been attempted and failed, teachers are turning inward, believing that it is a deficit on their part that has contributed to a student’s behavioral issues. Quiet reflection and feedback from colleagues or supervisors may be helpful in analyzing specific situations or interactions with students. But often, it is what you can’t see that has contributed more significantly to the classroom outbursts than any of the actions of the teacher.

This chapter will explore how ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) affect behavior in children. There is a scientific component that educators must understand in order to fully recognize what is going on inside the mind and body of the student who is disrupting the classroom. These adverse experiences make it more difficult for a child to maintain an emotional homeostasis and thus, appropriate boundaries within the learning environment. This chapter is written so that educators can understand how their actions may or may not be contributing to a student’s outbursts and what they can do to mitigate these disruptive behaviors moving forward. It is not to say that educators have no part in these interactions, but rather provide educators with insight on how the root cause may be entrenched in trauma and how their behaviors can either exacerbate or mitigate the effects of this trauma. The good news is that you get to decide your path forward.

MANIFESTATION OF TRAUMA IN CHILDREN: A CASE STUDY

“He hates me!” I tried to grasp the gravity of the situation while watching the first-grade teacher feverishly clean up a bevy of crayons and papers off the floor. “I swear, he hates me! He never treated Barb like this.” There was a mix of hurt and anger in her words. “He can’t hate you, Bonnie...it’s only the second day of school!” She continued her diatribe, asserting the “facts” that proved her new student had a particular aversion to her. It was as if I hadn’t said a word.

“When other kids talk, he seems to listen. When I start talking, he tunes out. I tried to use proximity to get him back on task, but that only seemed to upset him. So... I call on him and he ended up ripping his paper to pieces and then put his head down.” This explained the papers strewn across her floor. She went on. “When I told him that he’d have to stay in at recess to make up the work and clean up the mess, he flipped over his desk and tried to run out of the room! I had to call Mr. Watson to come and get him.”

Mr. Watson was our school’s paraprofessional and the one we called when we needed physical assistance. He was big and kind and fair. All the kids loved Mr. Watson and he was a valued member of the staff. “He calmed right down once Watson came in. Here I am catering to him all morning and nothing. Watson comes in and in five minutes they’re in the Calm Down Corner whispering like they’re best friends.” As I listened to Bonnie, I struggled with what to disclose to her. As the school’s social worker, I was fiercely protective of confidential information and generally functioned on a “need to know” basis.

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