

The Importance of Trauma-Informed Schools for Maltreated Children

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Abstract

Exposure to childhood maltreatment is detrimental to the academic success and educational outcomes of students. It leads to a myriad of deficits related to neurodevelopment and neuroprocessing, which causes disruptions in academic performance, emotional and behavioural regulation, and school attendance. By becoming trauma-informed, schools can mitigate these adverse experiences and promote positive experiences within the learning environment. Through professional development and the implementation of social-emotional learning and trauma-sensitive policies, educators can combat the negative role of maltreatment on the academic success of maltreated students.

Communities, families, and children experience the impacts of child maltreatment everyday. Experiencing direct or indirect harm at the hands of someone a child trusts can make that child vulnerable to a number of short- and long-term consequences (Child Trends, 2018; Government of Canada, 2012). Five types of maltreatment are identified in the literature: physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, emotional harm, and exposure to family violence. The 2008 *Canadian Incidence Study on Reported Child Abuse and Neglect* reported 85,440 substantiated child maltreatment-related investigations (Trocmé et al., 2010, p. 3). Children spend a third of their days within the formal school setting; thus, it is important to acknowledge the effects upon academic achievement and educational outcomes related to child maltreatment. Embracing a school-wide trauma-informed perspective requires adopting a trauma-sensitive lens, implementing professional development, adding social-emotional learning to the curriculum, and shifting policy to reflect trauma-informed approaches (Flatow, Blake, & Huang, 2015; Phifer & Hull, 2016). Trauma-informed schools are a way to mitigate the negative effects of maltreatment and promote the success of all students.

Maltreatment's Impact on Children

Childhood maltreatment has serious implications for the neurodevelopment of children, which can lead to impairments in the areas of neuro-processing, functioning, and learning (Romano, Babchishin, Marquis, & Frechette, 2015). When children are deprived of healthy, prosocial interactions and experiences in their homes, and are exposed to harm and chaos, they become vulnerable to a myriad of deficits in relation to key developmental processes. Maltreatment can negatively impact children's ability to perform academically, respond emotionally and behaviourally to their environment, and attend school. Exposure to maltreatment is detrimental to the healthy development of children and leads to significant challenges as children venture through their educational journeys.

Neurological Impact

To understand the impact of maltreatment on academic achievement, one must first understand its role in the neurological development of children. When exposed to different forms of harm, such as physical abuse or neglect, the brain may experience instances of "insufficient sensory exposure" (omission of nurture) and/or "atypical activation of neurons" (subjection to harm) (Romano et al., 2015, pp. 420, 431). Early-age stressors and the absence of healthy parental-child relationships can be influential during sensitive periods of growth and brain development, and may lead to significant changes to its anatomy (Ortiz-Ospina, 2017; Romano et al., 2015). The disruption of healthy anatomical brain development interrupts normal

processes in the brain and can ultimately lead to educational difficulties because of impairments in an array of neuro-processing functions (Romano et al., 2015). Memory, language, concentration, regulation, behaviour, perception, and cognition deficits can occur as a result of the neurodevelopmental impairments that accrue from child maltreatment – all of which are vital to learning (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council of the National Academies, 2014). Acknowledging the negative role that child maltreatment has on brain development, and the interruption of neuroprocessing functions, enables us to understand the many challenges associated with academic functioning.

Developmental Processes

Attachment, emotional regulation, and sense of agency are integral in fostering a sense of mastery and confidence in relation to the world children live in (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council of the National Academies, 2014; Romano et al., 2015). Child maltreatment often occurs in environments that are characterized by instability, chaos, and high stress. This environment, accompanied by inconsistent and unhealthy parent-child interactions, creates a sense of unpredictability and insecurity, and disrupts the children's ability to develop attachment bonds with their caregivers (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council of the National Academies, 2014). Secure attachments are critical in how children see themselves in relation to the world around them and how they learn to navigate through various personal and interpersonal challenges. When caregivers expose their children to abuse, neglect, or negative affects such as fear and worry, insecure and/or disorganized attachments result. A caregiver's inability to meet the needs of a child can lead to disruptions in that child's learning to interact with others in a healthy prosocial manner. The attachment between a child and his/her caregiver sets a template for how the child understands and interacts with the world in later years, which can be negatively influenced by maltreatment.

Children learn emotional regulation by initially depending on their caregivers to respond and assist them through difficult emotional states, and by later observing and modelling how they respond to situations (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council of the National Academies, 2014). When the caregivers themselves are either causing the distress or experiencing it themselves, the children are unable to learn the skills and strategies required to overcome their negative emotional states (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council of the National Academies, 2014). A level of dysfunction is assumed within the homes of those who experience childhood maltreatment, and they are therefore more vulnerable to high-stress situations (Romano et al., 2015). The absence of this early learning of emotional regulation and parental support can result in the use of maladaptive methods to respond to negative emotional states. Many maltreated children learn to live in silence and secrecy in order to protect their families and themselves from future harm, and they may internalize their issues, resulting in increased anxiety and depression (Institute of Medicine and National Research Council of the National Academies, 2014; McGuire & Jackson, 2018). Others express their maltreatment experiences through externalizing behaviours such as aggression and acting out, behaviours they may have seen used in the home by their abusers. These emotional and behavioural responses can be extremely problematic within a school setting, with difficulties arising in classroom focus, task completion, peer engagement, and learning strategies, all of which are dependent on children being able to regulate their emotions (McGuire & Jackson, 2018). Emotional regulation is learned early in a child's life through modelling and co-regulation, but maltreatment causes disruptions in the learning of these strategies, which leads to challenges later in childhood.

A sense of agency is vital in children being able to master their sense of self, ability, and control over their environment, all of which can be undermined by exposure to maltreatment (Romano et al., 2015). In order for a sense of agency to develop, children must feel safe and supported enough in their early years to explore their environments and their capabilities

(Gowrie South Australia, 2015). When experiencing maltreatment by a caregiver, children feel a lack of safety and control over the situation, and as though they cannot change their circumstances (Romano et al., 2015). They may also lack guidance and encouragement from their caregivers in the pursuit of their independence, and may be more likely to feel a sense of helplessness and insecurity in relation to the world around them. Self-efficacy is critical in children being able to master their learning environments and academic milestones, but maltreatment can undermine their belief that they can have accomplishments and control in their lives. Maltreatment influences how children develop and form relationships, how they manage their emotional and behavioural responses to difficult situations, and how they see themselves, their abilities, and their control over their environment. The detrimental effects of maltreatment on attachment, emotional regulation, and sense of agency limit children from confidently navigating through the educational system in many ways.

Academic Achievement and Educational Outcomes

Child maltreatment negatively affects children's academic achievement and educational outcomes as seen through academic performance, emotional and behavioural responses in school, and attendance (Romano et al., 2015). Maltreatment influences and disrupts many of the development processes that promote learning and functioning in children, such as executive functioning, knowledge retention, comprehension, and analysis, all of which play a role in academic performance (Hong, Rhee, & Piescher, 2018). Executive functioning influences a child's ability to manage behaviourally and emotionally within structured educational environments, and to process, understand, and retain learned information (Hong et al., 2018). For those who have experienced maltreatment, cognitive functioning can be impaired in the domains of knowledge, comprehension, and analysis. Because of the disruption of these core cognitive functions, children experiencing maltreatment are more at risk for compromised academic outcomes, higher grade repeats, cognitive delays, poorer performance on standardized measures, lower grade point averages, speech and language impairments, lower IQ scores and lower reading scores that measure cognitive complexity, special education interventions, and lower grades compared to those who have not experienced maltreatment (Kiesel, Piescher, & Edleson, 2016; McGuire & Jackson, 2018; Romano et al., 2015). The disruption of key cognitive functions responsible for academic success and educational outcomes derail a child's ability to learn effectively and perform academically.

The challenges associated with developing healthy, adaptive emotional and behavioural responses to situations for children who have experienced maltreatment play a role in their ability to perform at school. The internalization of maltreatment experiences may lead to the development of mental health concerns such as anxiety and depression, which have been connected to difficulties with reading performance (Romano et al., 2015). Children who tend to externalize their issues may behaviourally express themselves through inattention, hyperactivity, and other behavioural challenges such as learned aggression and violence (McGuire & Jackson, 2018). They may struggle to sit still during a lesson plan, possibly act out or be caught goofing off with their classmates, or even get into frequent fights with their peers. These students are more likely to experience academic delays, behavioural issues when faced with unattainable expectations, stress, and limited self-regulation capabilities (Romano et al., 2015). These children may also struggle to see the world, and hence school, as a safe and trusting place, making academic performance and focus difficult. Behavioural and emotional challenges are also associated with lower performances on reading, math, and writing, which continue to weaken over continued exposure, leading to more and more struggles academically (Romano et al., 2015). The role that different forms of abuse and neglect have on children's foundational neuro-processing components gives understanding to why maltreated children struggle to implement effective emotional and behavioural regulatory strategies in their schools and other learning environments.

Maltreated children struggle with school attendance rates, one of the fundamental components of academic success. When children do not attend school, they can quickly fall behind on course work, miss important lesson plans aimed at developing their skills, and lack the opportunity to adapt to the structure of their classrooms. Maltreated children's daily lives are characterized by many inconsistencies and instabilities that can influence the structure of their days. They demonstrate significantly lower rates of attendance and higher rates of school-to-school transfers (Kiesel et al., 2016). These inconsistencies of attendance may be a result of lack of parental assistance to ensure school attendance, staying up late into the night because of maltreatment, feeling embarrassed to attend class for fear of being ousted, and/or feeling the need to stay home from school to protect the more vulnerable parent from abuse (Kiesel et al., 2016). Regular absences, even excused, can increase a child's likelihood of facing academic challenges and learning difficulties; thus it is important that educators recognize maltreatment's influence on attendance. Maltreated children experience an array of challenges that influence their academic achievement and educational outcomes, observed through decreased academic performance, difficult emotional and behavioural responses, and poor attendance rates (McGuire & Jackson, 2018). Acknowledging the influence of maltreatment on children's development provides a roadmap for understanding the hurdles in their academic experiences.

Trauma-Informed Schools

By becoming trauma informed, schools can address the influence of childhood maltreatment on academic success and educational outcomes. Being aware of the effects of trauma, and how they present themselves through emotional and behavioural responses in schools, gives educators the opportunity to respond in a trauma-sensitive way as a means of supporting healing and limiting re-traumatization in students (Flatow et al., 2015; Phifer & Hull, 2016; Stewart & Martin, 2018). There are a variety of trauma-informed approaches and strategies, but underlying all of those are the ideas of trust, collaboration, empowerment, peer support, safety, choice and culture and gender awareness (Steward & Martin, 2018). By providing safety, structure, and compassion, schools can mitigate the negative role of maltreatment on children's academic success and, consequently, foster resiliency and growth (Berardi & Morton, 2017). Embracing a school-wide trauma-informed perspective requires adopting a trauma-sensitive lens, implementing professional development for staff, administration, and support staff, adding social-emotional learning to the curriculum, and shifting policy to reflect trauma-informed ideals. Trauma-informed schools promote the growth and success of all students, but in particular those who have been exposed to maltreatment.

Trauma-Sensitive Lens

A trauma-sensitive lens within the school setting requires that school personnel challenge their labelling tendencies toward children who demonstrate trauma response behaviours in the classroom (Anderson, Blitz, & Saastamoinen, 2015). Children affected by maltreatment often present with many behavioural and emotional challenges, which translate to difficulties with learning. Children whose neurological systems are programmed to operate in survival and defence mode are viewed as impulsive, defiant, or non-compliant when under perceived threat (Berardi & Morton, 2017). By mislabelling, school personnel attribute the behaviours to choice and conscious acts of defiance by the children, when in reality the behaviours are a result of the children experiencing a sense of overwhelming distress (Anderson et al., 2015). This ill-informed approach to viewing children with problem behaviours is in line with the lens of asking "What is wrong with you?" (Dorado, Martinez, McArthur, & Leibovitz, 2016, p. 164). Alternatively, a trauma-sensitive lens asks the question "What has happened to you?" which changes how school personnel interpret the behavioural responses of children and ultimately how they understand and respond to the behaviours. By understanding the root of the

behaviours, school personnel can respond with supportive, compassionate interventions as a way to engage children and promote safety and security (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016). Viewing challenging behaviours of maltreated children through a trauma-sensitive lens challenges preconceived notions of intentional misbehaving and labelling, and enables school personnel to respond to children through a lens of understanding and support.

Professional Development

Professional development supports staff, administration, and support staff to adopt attitudes, beliefs, and approaches underpinning trauma-informed schools (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016). Professional development opportunities should be focused on preparing school personnel to recognize signs and symptoms of maltreatment, and understanding the role of maltreatment on brain development, its effects on learning and the unique needs of students (Dorado et al., 2016; Stewart & Martin, 2018). Shared knowledge leads to the implementation of a common language among school personnel and ultimately builds a consensus among school attitudes. Professional development is an opportunity for school personnel to develop strategies and skills to use within classrooms in order to target the identified symptoms of maltreatment that impede learning (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016). These educational opportunities have been executed, not only among staff and educators, but students alike, as a means of shifting a school understanding of the role of trauma and maltreatment on students and in their learning (Phifer & Hull, 2016). Professional development is a critical component in creating a trauma-informed school, where understanding maltreatment's influence on learning and behaviour is a shared perspective and common language is applied in trauma-informed intervention strategies.

Social-Emotional Learning

Social-emotional learning in classrooms promotes emotional and behavioural management among children, which is particularly important for those whose self-regulation abilities have been affected by maltreatment (Walkey & Cox, 2013). The safety and security of classrooms make them optimal spaces for children to learn to process their feelings and develop strategies geared toward their future experiences and self-regulation capabilities (Anderson et al., 2015). Social-emotional practices that have been implemented in classrooms include behavioural intervention programs, self-regulation interventions, feelings exploration curriculum, mindfulness strategies, conflict resolution programs, and other interventions that promote child resiliency and emotional and behavioural management (Dorado et al., 2016). Teaching students about the role of maltreatment and trauma on the brain and its interruption on learning gives them the opportunity to recognize their own symptoms of distress. Additionally, teaching children practical tools to cope with stress and the associated physiological responses builds confidence in their own abilities to manage stressful situations (Phifer & Hull, 2016). The implementation of social-emotional learning and practices in school curriculum also supports staff personnel in managing vicarious stress and trauma, therefore making classrooms a more positive, supportive space for learning (Anderson et al., 2015). Social-emotional learning in classrooms has been correlated with fewer classroom disruptions, less punitive office visits, a decrease in incidents of physical aggression, and fewer instances of suspensions (Dorado et al., 2016). By implementing social-emotional curriculum, schools can support children who have been exposed to maltreatment and consequently lack the ability to manage themselves emotionally and behaviourally through self-regulation.

Policy

True trauma-informed schools adopt a shift in system policies that support and advocate for children affected by maltreatment. Zero tolerance and blanket policies take away from the

unique experiences that children bring with them, and generalize through intervention approaches (Anderson et al., 2015). These approaches and policies, often punitive and disciplinary, have been found to be ineffective in their attempt to manage behaviours and encourage compliance. Rewriting policies and interventions through a trauma-informed and culturally safe lens limits children from becoming socially isolated, feeling labelled, and experiencing re-traumatization by potentially penalizing disciplinary policies (Phifer & Hull, 2016; Stewart & Martin, 2018). Schools have incorporated specialized clinicians to provide a trauma-informed lens to staff development efforts, and to implement policy revisions and behavioural support plans for students (Dorado et al., 2016). Through this collaboration traditional policies of evaluating student success that are dependent solely on academic performance can be challenged to shift to more holistic approaches of accounting for student successes (Stewart & Martin, 2018). Schools can support maltreated students by promoting an environment of trust, safety, empowerment, collaboration, choice and support by means of trauma-informed policies (Phifer & Hull, 2016; Stewart & Martin, 2018). Implementing a trauma-sensitive lens, professional development for staff, adding social-emotional learning to the curriculum, and shifting policy to reflect trauma-informed approaches enables a culture of trauma-informed perspective in school settings.

Conclusion

Child maltreatment is an adverse experience to which many Canadian students fall victim. Exposure to maltreatment can have significant implications on neurodevelopment and the developmental processes of attachment, self-regulation, and sense of agency (Romano et al., 2015). These are all underlying functions of the healthy cognitive and intellectual development that are required for children to succeed within a learning environment. Maltreatment negatively influences academic achievement and educational outcomes through compromised academic performance, emotional and behavioural responses, and attendance (McGuire & Jackson, 2018). By becoming trauma informed, schools can mitigate the effects of maltreatment on children's academic success and educational outcomes. Adopting a school-wide trauma-informed lens enables teachers, administration, and support staff to recognize the negative impact of maltreatment on behavioural and emotional responses. Through professional development, the implementation of social-emotional learning in the classroom, and trauma-sensitive policies, schools can become a place of safety and healing for maltreated children (Flatow et al., 2015; Phifer & Hull, 2016). As front-line service providers to children, educators must adopt an approach of compassion and understanding in order to combat the negative effects of maltreatment on academic success and educational outcomes.

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