

# CONNECTIONS MATTER IN EDUCATION

An educator's guide to addressing toxic stress

## TOXIC STRESS

Stress operates along a continuum. Experiencing some stress, like knowing a test is coming up next week, is a normal and essential part of healthy development. It helps our minds and bodies develop a healthy response, like studying for the test in advance. However, when a child experiences stress in powerful, frequent, prolonged, and unpredictable doses, that level of stress can be detrimental to a child's development and life-long health. Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, are examples of traumatic or toxic stress that are now commonly acknowledged to be a major determinant of health and learning outcomes.

## TOXIC STRESS IN SCHOOL

Children who experience toxic stress may have more difficulty concentrating in school or exhibit inappropriate behaviors in a classroom. Part of why they exhibit these negative behaviors is due to their brain development. If, at a young age, a child cannot predict where, when, or how much stress they will experience, their brains and bodies become hardwired to react more quickly and with a heightened fight, flight, or freeze response. A simple request in a classroom could trigger a stress response that results in an argument or a complete shutdown. Educators play an important role in creating positive environments by recognizing the way stress and trauma affect children's behaviors and abilities, and by creating safe spaces for children to maintain or regain a sense of calm. All children, particularly those with histories of toxic stress, need structures in school to help them regulate their physical and emotional responses.

## AN AVERAGE IOWA CLASSROOM

Childhood trauma is often passed from generation to generation in cycles that are hard to break. Based on data from the 2012 Iowa Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), on average, five out of every 30 students in an Iowa classroom live with a parent that has experienced significant childhood traumas. These experiences may impact a parent's stress response and can sometimes translate into tumultuous childhoods for their children.



## 10 TYPES OF STUDIED ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

### ABUSE

- 1 Physical
- 2 Psychological
- 3 Sexual

### NEGLECT

- 4 Physical
- 5 Psychological

### HOUSEHOLD DYSFUNCTION

- 6 Substance abuse
- 7 Parent with mental illness
- 8 Incarcerated parent
- 9 Divorce
- 10 Domestic violence

## STUDENTS WITH A HIGHER NUMBER OF ACES ARE MORE LIKELY TO:



Score lower on standardized tests



Have language difficulties



Be suspended or expelled



Have poorer health



Fail a grade

A recent study of children in Iowa today revealed that many face risk factors for toxic stress. A youth survey found that 11% disagree with the statement, “There is at least one adult at school I could go to for help with a problem” and 19% of young children live in households below 100% of poverty. The potential impact of toxic stress can be seen in test scores, alcoholism in teens, and graduation rates: 27% of 8th graders are not proficient in math, 23% of youth surveyed have had a full drink of alcohol, and 10% of students do not graduate from high school on time. Iowa’s classrooms are impacted by trauma in a number of ways but there are examples from around the nation of how schools can respond.

## SUCCESSFUL MODELS

*Helping Traumatized Children Learn* by Susan Cole is an excellent resource for educators, providing background in becoming trauma sensitive and laying the groundwork for developing education systems that are responsive to traumatized children.

### EXAMPLE

A model developed by Washington State University is showing promising outcomes in schools. Collaborative Learning for Educational Achievement and Resilience (CLEAR) partners with education systems to create and sustain trauma-informed models of practice through staff development and consultation. CLEAR is a three- to four-year systems change process, which helps shift school culture and policies to be supportive of trauma-informed practices in the school environment. CLEAR aligns with other existing models of social-emotional and mental health supports in schools and empowers school professionals to support the high needs of students and families.

### KEY COMPONENTS

Successful models share core components. First, a school- or even district-wide acceptance that trauma and toxic stress impact the brains and bodies of children in school is fundamental. Without a common understanding and language, well-intentioned programs may have little impact on children’s daily lives and learning potential. These models also focus on psychosocial needs of children and social-emotional learning, creating a sense of predictability, structure, and safety in a classroom, as well as the entire school. These models strive to help professionals hold kids accountable, while being mindful of their individual stress responses. The approaches acknowledge that professionals themselves may experience trauma and triggers as well.

## FIND YOUR CONNECTION

Educators and education systems have unique opportunities to respond to the social and emotional needs of the children they work with and the communities in which they operate. Here are some responses:

- 1 Encourage a trauma-informed environment in your setting.** Whether you are a teacher, an administrator, a librarian, or a bus driver, you can become trauma-informed and support a trauma-informed environment in your school to usher in a safer, more stable and nurturing environment for your community overall. Encourage similar adoption among your peers and leaders.
- 2 Educate your peers.** Educate your peers about the impact of toxic stress on children and adults and build interest in a trauma-informed system involving all school staff.
- 3 Integrate community and family services into schools.** Support prevention of toxic stress exposure by encouraging the development of social-emotional and mental health services in the school setting and seek other opportunities in the community. Community partners could include health centers, family centers, food pantries, family support groups, and violence prevention groups.

*Find more information and a list of references at [www.iowaaces360.org](http://www.iowaaces360.org).*

*To learn more about the Connections Matter community effort, visit [www.connectionsmatter.org](http://www.connectionsmatter.org).*

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