

Trends is published regularly throughout the school year by **Cornerstone Day School** as a service to New Jersey school professionals. Each issue highlights one important topic with practical applications for those working with students with emotional and behavioral problems.

TRENDS



"Integrating state of the art psychiatric treatment and outstanding academics within a dynamic school environment."

When the brain is under stress and resorts to fight/flight/freeze mode, higher order executive functioning skills are inaccessible.

To learn more:

- Anxiety and Stress Disorders – A guide to managing panic attacks, phobias, PTSD, OCD, social anxiety disorder, and related conditions. (Harvard Medical School Special Health Report)
- Helping a Child Manage Fears – Includes tips for helping your child and a list of common childhood reactions to trauma. (Sidran Institute)
- Understanding Traumatic Stress in Children (PDF) – Booklet aimed at parents or caregivers of children who've experienced traumatic stress. (Bright Horizons Foundation)

HELPING STUDENTS DEAL WITH TRAUMATIC EVENTS

We live in an era of 24/7 media that saturates us with information through our phones, tablets, laptops, television and radio. We are exposed to news of fires, floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, and other natural disasters, as well as explosions, and other traumatic events that threaten our sense of safety and security, and they occur around the world on any given day. Adults often struggle with the effects of news of traumatic events, even though they may be more capable of understanding and managing their emotional responses to them. Children may be less able to understand and manage this information, and react differently based on their personality, age, and circumstances.

Parents and teachers should decide how much anxiety laden information their children/students can handle. Children may also experience traumatic stress by witnessing community or neighborhood violence, bullying, immigration/migration/refugee status, and institutional trauma (from the foster care system or juvenile detention). Trauma can include one of the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) identified by researchers. These adverse experiences include:

- Emotional, physical, or sexual abuse
- Neglect
- A parent who is incarcerated, gets a divorce, has a mental illness, has experienced domestic violence, or abuses alcohol or drugs

When we think about our students' brains, consider the analogy of an upstairs and a downstairs. The upstairs

brain, the prefrontal cortex (PFC), is our academic brain, and helps us with executive functioning skills like planning, organizing, regulating, and inhibiting impulses. The downstairs brain consists of our limbic system (including the amygdala), which is responsible for our fight/flight/freeze response and bypasses the PFC so our bodies can respond quickly to threats of danger (perceived or real). What does this look like?

- Cortisol and adrenaline, stress hormones, flood the brain
- The muscles contract and eyes dilate
- Palms may get sweaty
- Heart rate increases

The body is ready to fight, run away, or freeze to survive. The most critical thing to remember is that our brains and bodies are wired for survival. Even though we're not all necessarily facing predatory

HELPING STUDENTS DEAL WITH TRAUMATIC EVENTS - CONTINUED

animals in the wild, our brains respond the same way to other events in our lives. When the brain is under stress and feels like it needs to be in fight/flight/freeze mode, the upstairs brain turns off, and the body relies on the downstairs brain. That means those higher-order, executive functioning skills are inaccessible. Usually, a stressful event results in a brief elevation of cortisol, and this can help us perform better (think: “getting in the zone” for a sports game, performance, or test). While good in small doses, large amounts of stress can be toxic for our brains and bodies. When we’re faced with trauma, our brains are constantly in this state of toxic stress.

What can educators and other adults do when our students are exposed to news of a traumatic event or experience one first hand? The following steps will help lessen the harmful effects:

- Remain as calm as possible; watch and listen to your student to understand how upset he or she is.
- Explain a traumatic event as accurately as possible, but don’t give graphic details. It’s best not to give more information than a child/adolescent asks for.
- Let the student know that it is normal to feel upset, scared or angry.

If older children or teenagers want to watch television or read news online about a traumatic event, be available to them, especially to discuss what they are seeing and reading.

Most children and teenagers will recover from their fear. But you can watch for these signs of ongoing distress:

- Difficulty sleeping
- Change in eating habits
- Clinginess

- Re-experiencing the event through nightmares, recollections, or play
- Avoidance anything reminiscent of the event
- Emotional numbing or lack of feeling about the event
- Jumpiness
- Persistent fears about another disaster

If after a month or so your student is still showing signs of distress, professional help may be indicated. Children and youth who have trouble getting beyond their fears may be suffering from a mood disorder, or posttraumatic stress disorder. That’s when it’s time to seek the assistance of a mental health professional. Many effective treatments are available for children and teens who experience anxiety or other difficulties related to traumatic stress.

