



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 problems.

TRENDS

TRAUMA-INFORMED SCHOOL-PARENT RELATIONSHIPS

Many parents live with the negative effects of growing up with adversity, stress, and trauma from their own childhood environment. Such exposures can include emotional abuse and neglect, witnessing domestic violence, and growing up with caregivers with mental health or substance use problems. While many adults recover from these effects, parenting can present with unique challenges that can be emotionally activating for parent survivors of trauma. When these experiences negatively affect parenting behaviors, it can result in intergenerational trauma – traumatic experiences being transmitted continuing to shape future generations.

To provide trauma-informed care, the first step is understanding the various effects that trauma can have on parents and families, such as common triggers and effects. Common parenting triggers for parents who have been exposed to childhood trauma include child behaviors that remind parents of their abuser or themselves as a child; children reaching the age or developmental stage in which the parent's trauma exposure occurred; and reminders of their unmet childhood needs. Triggers can also be unconscious – not connected to clear memories – because of the special way that trauma memories are encoded. These triggers can be associated with various parenting difficulties. Difficulties experienced by healthy parents may be magnified for parents with psychiatric difficulties and/or trauma exposure. Parents who have experienced trauma can have a hyperactive stress system that is more easily triggered

to go into fight or flight responses, even if these triggers are false alarms. Being in a chronic fight or flight state uses up our attentional 'resources', making it more difficult for parents to manage youth schedules and homework, be engaged with their child, or manage their emotions effectively. In addition, these parents may feel less confident in making decisions about their child due to excessive uncertainty and self-doubt.

These parents may feel stronger emotions and be more quick to get upset in the face of their own child's distress. Thus, they may be more inclined to use emotional parenting behaviors – parenting behaviors driven by strong emotions of parents themselves. These behaviors can make it challenging for parents to support their children who may be dealing with their own emotional difficulties. Such behaviors include overprotectiveness, inconsistent discipline, excessive criticism, and 'modeling' intense emotions and/or very strong avoidance (for instance, refusing to talk about feelings or being overly emotionally expressive).

Supporting parents

Other than being educated about how trauma can impact parents and families, educators can use trauma-informed principles to support parents:

- 1) **Promote a safe and welcoming environment.** Being in 'fight or flight' can cause parents to feel threatened easily, making it challenging to build positive relationships with schools. To address this, schools should promote safe environments. This includes physical safety and security, but also extends to welcoming interactions (for instance having staff members greet families warmly and by name when they enter the building).
- 2) **Trust and transparency.** Parents exposed to trauma may feel disempowered and have difficulty trusting others, particularly if their trauma involves betrayal by authority figures (e.g. in the case of sexual abuse). Invite parents to provide input on decisions and use this input. Make sure to have frequent communications with parents, with

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positive communications outnumbering negative communications. Establish communication early on, with a positive communication in the first month of the school year with parents. Have transparent plans for resolving conflict between parents and schools.

3) **Support.** Being exposed to trauma can make parents feel isolated and on the lookout for judgment due to an overly active alarm system. Thus, even when judgment is not intended, neutral statements by educators may be interpreted negatively by parents. In some cases, parents may be overly submissive or the opposite, antagonistic, due to these negative interpretations. Make sure that interactions with parents are empathetic, supportive, and non-judgmental. As trauma can affect a parent's ability to engage consistently, be patient and understanding if parents are struggling to keep up with school requirements

or communications. Sometimes, simply listening and providing a compassionate ear can be very helpful. Gently encourage parents to take care of their own well-being. Support can also come in the form of peer support, with schools and parents co-creating formal or informal programs for families to come together and support each other. For instance, you may have a voluntary or paid parent position to engage families and formalize peer support.

4) **Education and resources:** Share information about community resources such as counseling services, support groups, and financial assistance programs. Partner with local organizations to provide resources, referrals, and workshops. Such workshops may include managing stress, parenting strategies, and understanding trauma and learn collaboratively. It may be particularly helpful to ask parents about training topics that would like to

attend. Have staff and parents deliver and attend trainings together to show that you appreciate parents have useful skills and expertise of their own and foster a partnership model.

5) **Empowerment:** traumatic events take away our control over what happens to us and can make us feel helpless and disempowered. Educators may provide opportunities to practice exercising control, choice, and empowerment can be reparative for trauma-exposed parents. Recognize individuality of families and ensure that all communications are suitable to the parent's reading level and English language proficiency. Do not allow children to translate for parents instead using trained interpreter services when possible. Seek and integrate parents' perspectives about factors such as student supports and discipline for their child, rather than imposing standardized placements and consequences.



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