

Trauma Informed Practices in Preparing for Postschool Employment Success

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September 2021

Introduction

Using a trauma-informed lens can help educators be better prepared to meet students' unique educational and transition needs. Trauma informed care provides a common language and an understanding of how to approach situations in a way that is supportive. This brief provides an overview of trauma and trauma informed strategies to support students who have experienced trauma. These strategies are a sample of best practices and actions that can be implemented by educators, employers, and service providers to assist in preparing students for postschool employment success.

Overview of Trauma

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014) defines individual trauma as, "an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being" (p. 7). Research shows that when a person experiences an event that causes an adverse experience, the results are seen in their brain development and overall health which, in turn, impacts achievement and employment outcomes (SAMHSA, 2014).

Individuals with Disabilities and Trauma

While trauma impacts individuals in unique ways, it is more likely for a person with a disability to be exposed to trauma than a person without a disability (Austin, 2016; Wilcox, 2011). People with disabilities, particularly those with developmental or intellectual disabilities, are more likely to experience trauma in the form of abuse or assault compared to peers without disabilities. Further, not only are people with disabilities more vulnerable to violent traumatic events, they also may have limited capacity for resilience or healing from those events depending on the nature of their disability (Wilcox, 2011).

Trauma can also have a significant impact on the employment outcomes of individuals with disabilities as adults. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (February 2021), the unemployment rate in 2020 for people 16 and older with disabilities was 12.6%, while the rate for people without disabilities was 7.9%. The outcomes for individuals who have been exposed to trauma are similar (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021).

Experiencing trauma as a child can have long-term economic impact. Individuals with a history of trauma are more likely to be underemployed or unemployed. In 2009, the unemployment rate for individuals who reported at least one Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) was significantly higher than those who reported no ACEs (Liu, et al., 2013). People with disabilities, people who have experienced trauma, and people who have both factors are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed. Currie and Widom (2010) found that individuals who experienced maltreatment as children obtained one year less of education than individuals without a history of trauma. The study also reported that individuals who had suffered maltreatment were also less likely to be employed and if they were employed, they earned almost \$8000 less annually than their counterparts without trauma history (Currie & Wisdom, 2010).

The Signs of Trauma

Trauma can impact students in many different ways including social, emotional, physical, and mental well-being. By understanding the signs of trauma (Nordhoff, 2019; Perry & Daniels, 2016), educators are better prepared to recognize when students are experiencing difficulties due to trauma and provide appropriate supports so that students can succeed both in school and work.

Signs of trauma may include:

- Difficulty regulating emotions
- Demonstrating impulsive behaviors
- Suppressing memories
- Disruptive or defiant behavior
- Difficulty learning at the same rate as peers
- Lack of motivation
- Chronic absenteeism
- Substance abuse
- Risky sexual behavior

Strategies to Create a Trauma Informed Learning Environment

Studies have shown that strategies exist to support people who have experienced trauma (Liu, et al. 2013). It is imperative that educators employ strategies and practices that support a trauma informed learning environment that will promote student success in reaching postsecondary goals. Additionally, as educators work with students with disabilities to meet postsecondary goals, they should be aware that many of these classroom practices can be applied in employment settings.

Below are several practical strategies that can be used to create a trauma-informed classroom or employment settings. These strategies can be divided into three categories, 1) environment, 2) relationships, and 3) self-regulation and self-care (Honsinger & Brown, 2019).

Environment

By creating an environment in the classroom or employment setting that is both welcoming and predictable, educators can help students with disabilities who have experienced trauma feel safe and supported. This will assist students in reaching their full potential when transitioning to adult life.

Create a safe environment

Classrooms and employment settings should be welcoming spaces where students feel respected and know that their voices will be heard.

Provide spaces to take a break

This could be a comfortable chair in a corner of the classroom or a staff lounge area of an employment setting. Students or employees can use this break to utilize self-regulation strategies that they have learned.

Implement consistent routines and procedures

Order and consistency foster an environment that allows for trust and predictability. A classroom with clear expectations and routines is a safe place for students to learn. Similarly, students are more successful transitioning to the workplace if routines are established.

Plan for change

While consistency is key, change in routine happens in both the classroom and employment environment. Assist students in developing a plan for when the routine changes. This helps students increase their skills for adjusting to when a change to routine is coming.

Share your “Why”

As an employer or educator, promote respect in the workplace or school by sharing the “why” behind any changes in protocols or practices. When people understand the reasons behind decisions in their work or school environment, they often feel more empowered and are less likely to have a stress response.

Relationships

Building relationships by using effective communication strategies can help students feel connected and foster a sense of belonging. These relationships help to support students with disabilities who have experienced trauma stay engaged in learning and improve their behavior for postschool success.

Build positive relationships

Greeting students daily helps build rapport with your class. This helps to build positive relationships and a sense of community.

Prioritize relationships

Fostering resilience in someone starts by making time for them and building a connection with them.

Get to know each student

Ask students about their strengths and interests. Take time to review student records and learn from them or their families about the support they have outside of school.

Engage in active listening

Leaning in, asking questions, and paraphrasing to check that you understand what a student is saying will help students feel safe and comfortable to talk while you listen.

Be mindful

Words and actions can retraumatize. If you need to address concerns with a student, have that conversation with a calm voice, neutral facial expression, and away from other students.

Use collaborative problem-solving strategies

Model and teach students how to work together to solve problems that arise within the classroom. Students who can use this skill in other environments, such as a workplace, will be more productive.

Encourage collaboration among students

While it is important for students to have a relationship with their teachers and supervisors, it is also vital that students learn to build relationships with their classmates so that they can build relationships with their co-workers in the future.

Encourage cross-systems collaboration

As students prepare for the transition from school to work, it is important that school personnel, community agencies, and families collaborate to identify and provide supports needed for the student to be successful.

Self-Regulation and Self-Care

Students with disabilities, particularly those who have experienced trauma, may have difficulty regulating their emotions. By modeling and teaching self-regulation and self-care strategies, educators are encouraging habits that will help students transition to postsecondary opportunities.

Model and practice self-regulation and self-care

Show students that you are using the strategies listed below when you are feeling stressed or overwhelmed.

Take a technology break

A simple act of self-care is unplugging from technology, social media, or news outlets. Help students create a routine where they can be technology free for a set period each day. Educators can model this by setting aside a portion of school or work assignments to be completed without technology which encourages students to take a break from technology periodically.

Create a virtual self-care box

Students can dedicate a folder on their phone that houses a variety of apps. Apps featuring mood trackers, guided meditations, coloring pages, journaling, or playlists that can be easily accessed in one central location encourages more consistent use.

Create a self-care box

Help students identify an object such as a stress ball, journal and pen, lotion, or other item that can help calm them in school or on the job.

Include self-regulation and self-care in your classroom routines

Make time for moments to practice yoga, meditation, or breathing exercises with your students. Even one minute of relaxed breathing can help students regain focus or increase their sense of safety.

Schedule self-care

This could involve creating a calendar event with time set aside to go for a walk, practice a hobby, or listen to a guided meditation. Teach students how to use a calendar or reminder app on their devices to see their efforts to care for themselves.

Remember, health care is self-care

It's important to remind students that taking care of their health is an element of self-care.

Conclusion

The impact of trauma on students with disabilities and their progress toward achieving postsecondary goals can be substantial. However, educators can easily implement the strategies described in this brief to mediate the effects of trauma on students' education and employment. Trauma informed practices are inclusive and have benefits for all individuals regardless of trauma history, disability, culture, socioeconomic status, or race.

Consider speaking with your school administrator or professional development coordinator to discuss how you and your colleagues can implement trauma informed practices within your school and division. To learn more about trauma informed practices, resources are available through [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network](https://nctsn.org/) (nctsn.org), [ASCD](https://ascd.org/) (ascd.org), and your local trauma informed community network.

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