



Schools Can Do More to Help Students with Trauma Histories

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Figure 1 Photograph by Bruce Lam. CCO.

Many forms of adversity can impair children’s cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. The extent of their impairment depends on whether they have access to mental health services and whether they are kept safe from compounding traumatic events. School-based interventions can benefit children in need of academic and behavioral supports, although questions remain about which programs are most effective, scalable, and sustainable with limited resources. Questions also remain about which school-based programs best serve diverse populations, attend to issues of access, and have the potential to reach the largest number of children, including those who have yet to manifest symptoms of an underlying traumatic disorder.

Highlights

Schools can address the social, emotional, and academic needs of children with trauma histories.

Most school programs are individual and group-based interventions.

Classroom-based and school-wide programs remain largely untested yet remain promising.

In this review, we note existing programs used in schools to address the social, emotional, and academic needs of children with trauma histories. We summarize components of a various trauma-focused programs, categorized as: (a) individual and group-based approaches, (b) classroom-based approaches, and (c) school-wide approaches. For each category, we review and comment on the state and quality of research findings and provide illustrative examples from the literature to show how programs address trauma in the school context.

“Changing practices within schools so that vulnerable and traumatized children are better understood and more compassionately served is a goal shared by many school professionals, yet schools remain poorly equipped to address the needs of these children.”

Methods

We searched databases and examined reference lists of relevant articles to identify sources. After selecting articles, the research team created a detailed spreadsheet that listed the titles, authors, and program focus for each article abstract. We then conducted a full-text review of the article to extract more information about the program components, evaluation methods, and results.

Results

- Most programs currently used in schools are individual and group-based interventions designed to lessen the symptoms of trauma by attending to the emotional, psychological, and behavioral challenges of students.
- Programs within this category are primarily based on the concepts of cognitive behavioral therapy and rely on trained mental health clinicians to work with students one-on-one or in small groups.
- Classroom-based and school-wide programs remain largely untested yet remain promising.
- School-wide, systems-oriented programs that provide universal and targeted supports have potential to reach a wide range of students at relatively low cost. They are also less likely than individualized (clinical) interventions to stigmatize children in need of assistance, and to avoid a deficit model that stems from viewing trauma as a disorder.

What Does This Mean For?

Research and Evaluation: We can pay more attention to developing, evaluating, and sustaining trauma-informed programs and practices in schools. Advancing research on these programs and practices is critical to improving the life chance of vulnerable children with trauma histories.

Practice: Schools are ideal settings in which to promote the health and healing of vulnerable children. Changes made at a systems level enhance the student experience.

Social Action: We should reform schools to promote a safe and nurturing environment for all children, including those who have been negatively impacted by trauma.

People Working Within Schools: We must work to ensure that all students feel safe, respected, and valued; know the signs and symptoms of trauma in students; are aware of their own triggers and biases; and minimize risks for re-traumatization of students by lessening the use of punitive discipline. Schools should put support systems in place to address needs related to trauma exposure in students.

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