

The background is a light gray gradient with several overlapping, dashed white lines that form abstract, flowing shapes. The lines are thin and create a sense of movement and depth.

PART I

Trauma

Children are like wet cement. Whatever falls on them makes an impression.

—Haim Ginnot

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Pete and I talk a great deal about how we're in the middle of a "perfect storm" for education. Public accountability for educators is at an all-time high. Teachers are absorbing the blows of new evaluation systems, the advent of Common Core State Standards, debates over merit pay, rampant loss of tenure and job security, widespread fear of school shootings and security issues, the growing ranks of families in poverty, and a host of other challenges. That list doesn't even include our mandate to educate every child who walks through our doors, including the hungry, the angry, the anxious, the lonely, the tired, and the trauma-affected.

No one disagrees that students should be held to the highest standard of learning. Where conflict tends to occur is in how we tackle that goal. For many young people who have experienced trauma, success—academic or otherwise—seems out of reach. How do we support students who arrive at school affected by trauma and other not-OK experiences? How do we provide environments that are safe and predictable *and* motivational for learning?

Before we answer these questions, it is important to acknowledge some fundamental truths:

1. Trauma is real.
2. Trauma is prevalent. In fact, it is likely much more common than we care to admit.
3. Trauma is toxic to the brain and can affect development and learning in a multitude of ways.
4. In our schools, we need to be prepared to support students who have experienced trauma, even if we don't know exactly who they are.

5. Children are resilient, and within positive learning environments they can grow, learn, and succeed.

Those of us working in the caregiving field have long seen the effects that trauma has on young people. We have said, “I think this is a really big deal,” and we were right. Thanks to the pioneering research of Vincent Felitti and Robert Anda and their colleagues (Felitti et al., 1998), who launched a landmark study investigating how ACEs contribute negatively to overall health, this globally significant issue can no longer be ignored. This study and those that followed opened our eyes to the fact that trauma is bigger than just a mental health issue—it’s *everyone’s* issue. After all, the adults providing services to youth are affected by their students’ trauma; what’s more, they are equally likely to have experienced trauma themselves.

It follows, then, that the issue of trauma pertains to you, the reader, as well as to your most vulnerable students. Now I’ll ask you to be reflective: why did you choose this profession? What motivated you to enter the field, and what keeps you here? My colleagues and I ask these questions often in our trainings and consulting work. It is a powerful and foundational way to start connecting to those we work with. Many educators I’ve worked with reply that they believe they were “born to do this,” that they understand what children need, and that they want to be able to address those needs in a helpful way. Some do it because they experienced trauma themselves and can empathize or connect with children who may also be experiencing adversity, while others had a positive experience with an educational professional and want to provide the same for the next generation. Others enter the field because their own experiences in education were not positive, and they want to provide students with a better experience than their own. Some are still searching for the answers to these questions. Take a moment and think of your own answers: why are you here, and why do you stay?