



The North Carolina School Age Trauma and Resilience Resource Series

Section Three: Supporting Staff Resiliency

The North Carolina Child Care Resource and Referral School Age Initiative

Healthy workforce development is essential to dealing with the effects of trauma and toxic stress. Staff and co-workers employed by trauma-informed workplaces are more likely to showcase positive work behavior and exceed expectations. Current psychological research highlights that trauma-informed places of work record higher rates of staff retention, staff development, and employee work satisfaction (Davis Laak, 2014; Jackson, Firtko, Edenborough, 2007).

For school age professionals, a trauma-informed work environment is necessary. Apart from dealing with the stress associated with early care, many North Carolina school age workers face the mental and emotional struggles tied to lower compensation and irregular work hours. Comparable early education salary data by the NC Institute for Child Development Professionals, shows that an average afterschool/summer camp group leader earns an average of \$10 an hour -- a wage well below the \$14.72 living wage threshold in the state (NCICDP, 2015). The combined stress of under-compensation, early care fatigue, and pre-existing negative life events make school age professionals susceptible to traumatic induced stress.

Section Three of The North Carolina School Age Trauma and Resilience Series looks at the importance of staff resilience and workplace mental health support for school age professionals. This section focuses on how you can help fellow school age colleagues approach, cope, and deal with personal trauma and stress in the classroom.

The North Carolina School Age Trauma and Resilience Resource Series is developed in coordination with the NC Division of Child Development and Early Education, NC CCR&R Council, and Southwestern Child Development Commission.

Group Leaders Deal with Trauma Too!

Dealing with trauma is a life long process. For some adults the effects of trauma might develop as an extension of an intense childhood event, interaction, or upbringing. For others, traumatic stress can develop later in adult life from factors like wage insecurity, abusive relationships, social injustice, and other life events.

When looking at the quality and make up of your school age program, you must recognize that some of your peers might be experiencing a wide range of traumatic stress. The impact of this trauma can influence their work performance and work relationships. It is essential to remember, however, that understanding the personal struggles of your fellow staff members is a key step to help your colleagues thrive and your school age program succeed.

Below are three response mechanisms common to traumatic stress. It is important to be aware of these responses with co-workers and yourself. Remember, you are human and deal with trauma too!

1 Fight Response

A common adult reaction to trauma is the fight response. Psychologist P.J. Lang highlights that the fight response to trauma can be intense, irrational, and sometimes threatening (Lang, 1994). In the school age setting, a fight response may be exhibited by staff and peers in a number of different ways. Co-workers can appear to have a short fuse and quickly become aggressive and curt with other staff and students. Group leaders showcasing a fight response might lash out at others when challenged or confronted with problems and work place issues. Other signs of a fight response in the work environment are overworking, over-committing, and high amounts of stress over small work details.

2 Flight Response

The outward expression of internal trauma is not always evident. Some adults react to stress and past traumatic experiences by retreating. This response is commonly associated with an unwillingness to connect to peers at work or form relationships with staff and students. In the typical school age setting, staff experiencing a retreat-like traumatic response might seem distant and disconnected. They may attempt to shorten conversations and interactions, and may show a lack of motivation and interest in planning activities or even coming to work.

3 Freeze Response

The freeze response resembles a deer caught in the headlights. A gradual build up of stress or a quick reminder of a traumatic experience might leave a co-worker standing in a stupor, unable to respond to a situation or problem. For school age staff, this response might take place during a particular stressful part of the day, after a hard conversation with an angry parent, or following a school age related accident.





Working Together to Thrive

We approach staff-related trauma with empathy and understanding. Every adult you work with has experienced a life-altering event that causes stress and discomfort. With some adults, traumatic response might be an extension of past experiences as a child or adolescent. For others, a traumatic response could be the result of current stressors. If we have empathy and compassion with co-workers showcasing signs of trauma, then we build a stronger work place and a healthier space for school age students to grow and learn. Moreover, we also succeed in creating a safe environment for struggling staff members to decompress and effectively thrive as professionals.

Being a trauma-informed school age program does not require you to lower your workplace standards and expectations. Staff still need to come to work on time, interact productively with students and families, and follow rules. These are necessary parts of being a working adult.

Having a trauma-informed program means looking into workplace issues presented by co-workers and understanding WHY they respond to stressful situations the way they do.

This process requires the ability to look at each co-worker as an individual, reflect on outside factors that might impact their work performance, and work with team members to improve skills and stress-induced reactions.

As a school age program coordinator, administrator, and group leader, being trauma-informed in the workplace requires the ability to:

- Reflect on your own trauma responses and how they affect your school age program
- Stay calm and collected when dealing with staff, families, and students showcasing trauma influenced reactions
- Understand how each co-worker takes in information and communicate with them in a way they can understand
- Know how to hold other staff members accountable to work expectations while still respecting their mental health
- Work with staff to develop skills and increase leadership development
- Find ways to effectively manage your mental, physical, and emotional health

What is a traumatic trigger?

A traumatic trigger is a sight, smell, touch, or interaction that brings about a traumatic memory in an individual. A trigger might not be intentional or mean-spirited. It simply occurs due to the experiences of the person being affected. We must reflect on our personal triggers and be respectful of the triggers of our co-workers.

Possible triggers:

- The smell of a room or a specific person
- Seeing someone that looks like a past abuser
- Hearing a loud noise or scream
- Being asked personal or uncomfortable questions
- Being talked to in a negative or sarcastic tone
- Being physically touched or grazed by a stranger
- Having to communicate with the police or another official



Effective communication is key to dealing with the effects of trauma at the work place. Research from the Center on Health Care Strategies states that employees who have the ability to openly talk about personal and workplace stress are more likely to reflect on internal trauma and develop coping skills to manage traumatic stress (Menschner and Maul, 2016). Having open communication does not equate to prying for information. It simply means that you open yourself up to talk to struggling co-workers who need to decompress, share important information, or discuss personal triggers.

For program administrators and coordinators, trauma informed communication is directly tied to two simple concepts: an open-door communication policy and active listening.

Open-Door Communication

An open-door communication policy means that staff can come to administration at any time with stressors, past trauma, and personal triggers. This information will be kept confidential unless the staff member asks administration to share with other co-workers.

Active Listening

Active listening means that administration truly reflects on what a staff member is trying to communicate. If trauma is affecting staff performance, administration will seek to understand the root causes and work intently with the staff member to grow into a better school age provider.

Below are some other helpful tips to help build communication ties between school age staff.

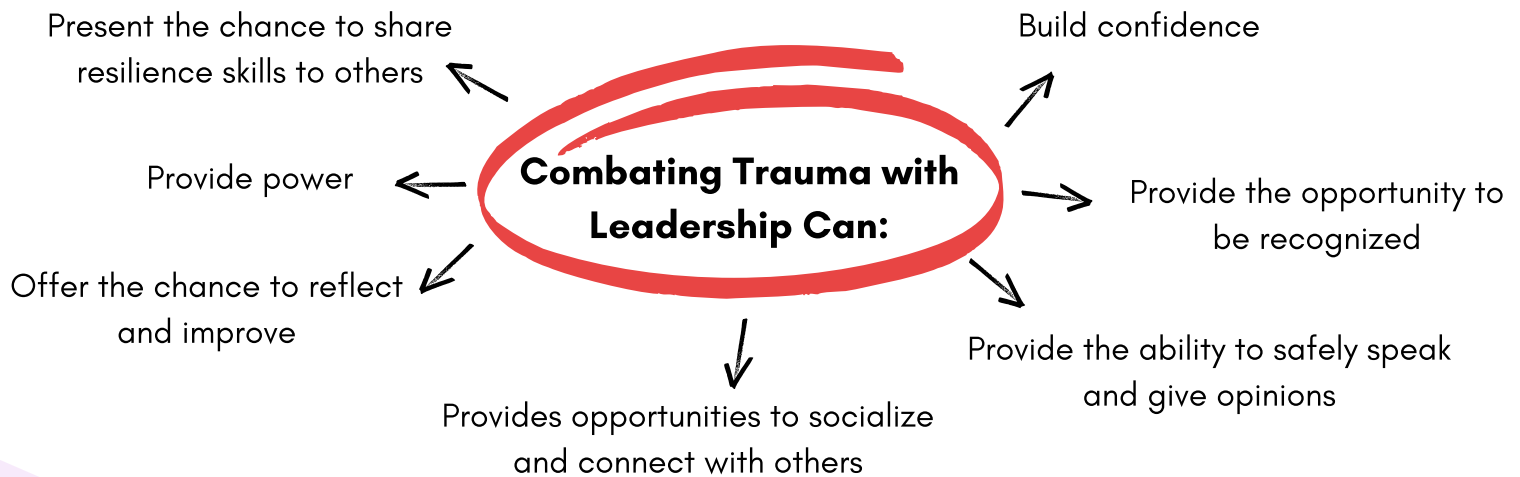
- Create a warm and inviting staff room for co-workers to take breaks. An inviting space to rest and relax will build communication, trust, and comradery among staff members.
- Use social connection applications like WeChat and Microsoft Teams, and Slack to start conversations and share ideas. You can be connected without being in-person.
- Hold monthly staff meetings. Make sure these meetings have times where staff can communicate issues and ideas. Think about inserting staff team building games into these meetings to build communication and trust.
- Relay community mental health resources for staff members needing professional support. Make an effort to destigmatize trauma-induced stress and mental health issues among staff.
- Think hard about how you present yourself to staff members. A smile and open body language is the first way to communicate openness and a willingness to talk. The quickest way to break down communication and trigger trauma is a bad attitude.
- Use your words to edify staff and co-workers. A nice comment goes a long way when fighting the effects of trauma.

Leadership



One of the most substantial effects of trauma is the loss of power. Traumatic exposure has the ability to completely rework the brain in ways that leave victims unable to self improve. For many adults this trauma-induced stagnation evolves to a loss of self-confidence, initiative, socialization, and professional advancement.

As a school age professional, you have the ability to empower staff members and help them reach their full potential. Think about the overall goals for students in your program. You want to see every student take ownership of their skills, process negative life events, and thrive. The same goals must exist for those who work along side you every day. Providing staff with leadership opportunities is a quick and easy way to help co-workers rebuild personal confidence and shift their mental outlook in a more positive direction.



Below are some quick and easy ways to help battle staff trauma with leadership opportunities:

- Develop leadership groups among staff members. Focus on areas of program development like curriculum, room arrangement, and community engagement.
- Give co-workers some say in sections of program coordination. Sections of the program like health and safety, snack preparation, and organization can be shared with staff with respected skills.
- Let staff and co-workers give opinions on yearly themes and activity preparation. You can rotate theme responsibility between staff members throughout the year.
- Provide staff with as much professional development as possible. Trainings and access to higher education is connected to personal advancement.
- Make sure your program has the ability for staff members to advance from within. The ability to become a program coordinator or a master teacher builds a stronger work community and personal confidence.



Relationships

Building healthy relationships is a key component to develop resilience. Researcher Linda Hartling highlights in her article "Strengthening Resilience in a Risky World" that strong and stable relationships are fundamental in eroding the effects of traumatic stress. Hartling concludes that solid relationships help adults redistribute the emotional load of trauma "off of their backs" and into the collective arms of others who can help them grow, develop, and safely address personal struggles (Hartling, 2010).

For school age professionals, a healthy work environment must include the ability to build strong and safe relationships with parents, co-workers, administration, and students. Having the ability to grow, learn, and share with others is an easy way to transform your school age program into a space that helps staff maximize their potential and emotional growth. Take a moment and reflect on the ways your school age program works to create strong and safe relationships among staff members.

Strong Relationships

Strong relationships go past simple formalities and small talk. They focus on developing empathy and concern about the well being of the other person. These relationships require trust and regular interaction.



Safe Relationships

Safe relationships are crafted in trust. Each person in the relationship understands the emotional triggers of the other and respects personal boundaries. These relationships require empathy, compassion, and trust.

Below are some simple ways to develop staff resilience with relationships building:

- Find ways to highlight achievements. Make an effort to publicly build up staff members who exceed expectations and requirements. Showing gratitude is a simple way to foster strong staff morale and dedication to the students you serve.
- Make an effort to send staff members to trainings, school age events, and conferences together. Connecting with peers outside of the classrooms builds comradery and lasting memories.
- Pair up school age groups for special activities. Giving group leaders the ability to go on field trips together or participate in shared group activities strengthens work bonds and encourages collaboration.
- Make sure to highlight the importance of safe relationships at work. Ensure that your orientation includes sections on harassment guidelines and workplace boundaries. Staff should understand who to talk to if they feel uncomfortable or unsafe at work.
- Reflect on the relationships between group leaders and administration. Many times group leaders might feel scared or intimidated by program administration. Take time to talk and interact with all staff to form strong work relationships with co-workers.
- Foster trusting relationships by encouraging autonomy. Show staff that you trust them with lesson plan development and other facets of their job to build trust and reduce resentment.

Quick Tools for Resilience

National Alliance on Mental Illness

Website: www.namiswwa.org

North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services

Website: www.ncdhhs.gov

Office of Early Childhood Education

Website: www.acf.hhs.gov

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Website: www.nctsn.org

Devereux Institute

Website: www.devereux.org

NC Healthy Social Behaviors Project

Website: www.childcareresourcesinc.org

National Council for Behavioral Health

Website: www.thenationalcouncil.org

The Trauma Foundation

Website: www.thetraumafoundation.org

Resources for Resilience

Website: www.resourcesforresilience.com

For more support with school age care and school age resilience please feel free to reach out to the NC School Age Initiative:

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