



The North Carolina School Age Trauma and Resilience Resource Series

Section One: Understanding School Age Trauma

The North Carolina Child Care Resource and Referral School Age Initiative

Trauma is quickly becoming a topic of concern in our nation's school age programs. Research from the National Child Traumatic Stress Initiative highlights that over two-thirds of the nation's youth face at least one traumatic event by the time they turn 16 years old (NCTSI, *Understanding Child Trauma*, 2015). Data from the National Council on Behavioral Health goes further and states that over 70% of American adults struggle with the effects of trauma in their daily lives (NCBH, *How to Manage Trauma*, 2018).

The North Carolina School Age Trauma and Resilience Resource Series aims to equip school age providers with tools to help students and staff manage trauma. Section One of this series addresses the indicators associated with trauma for both staff and students. It focuses on the root causes of school age trauma, and the ways traumatic stress affects student performance and group leader effectiveness. The purpose of Section One is to help lead school age professionals to the resiliency tools found in Section Two and Section Three of the School Age Trauma and Resilience Series.

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.



What causes trauma induced toxic stress?

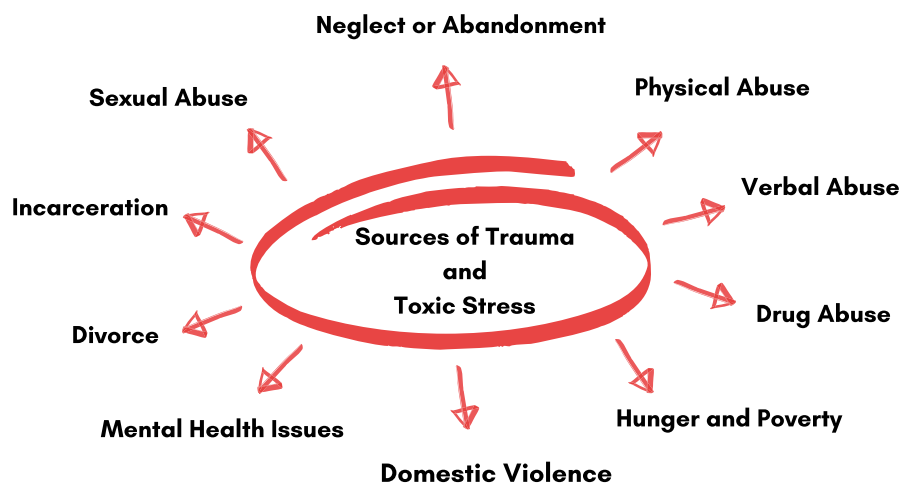
The factors that produce long term trauma and toxic stress are personal in nature. For some children and adults, one traumatic event can stir emotions and memories that bring along a lifetime of stress. For other students and adults, toxic stress may only appear with exposure to multiple instances of trauma during a short period of time.



It is the personal nature of trauma and toxic stress that makes this issue important for school age professionals. The close knit nature of school age care places you in a perfect position to offer student, families, and co-workers support and direction. As a school age leader, you have the ability to help recognize trauma and toxic stress in your program and mold your classroom to maximize success.



While the foundations of trauma and toxic stress are individual in nature, research from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recognizes common trauma indicators associated with toxic stress in students and adults. Reflect on these indicators and think about which ones might impact the lives of those in your school age program (CDC, *Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences*, Updated 2020).



Data gathered by education specialists Olga Price and Wendy Ellis highlight that 47% of school age students experience at least one of the above trauma indicators by the time they turn 18 years old (Price and Ellis, *Education Weekly*, 2018). Over the past two years, the prevalence of these indicators has increased nationwide due in part to social media exposure and easier access to the internet (Price and Ellis, 2018).



Price and Ellis's data is supported by research provided by the CDC and the Kiaser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences study that originally reported findings in 1997. Updated findings from this study released in 2019 indicate that 61% of American adults struggle with the effects of at least one of the mentioned trauma indicators listed above. The number of traumatic episodes increases fourfold for women and racial minorities living in poverty (CDC. *Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences*, 2019).

Think hard about your school age program. How many students, families, and co-workers fall into these statistics above? What about you personally?

Effects of trauma and toxic stress on students?

Trauma and toxic stress affect students in different ways. The personal nature of trauma forces students to create individualized coping responses as a way to address and adapt to stressful change. Simple school age activities like picking up centers, transitioning to snack time, or exiting the program might trigger these coping responses, which in turn create challenging behaviors for your program.

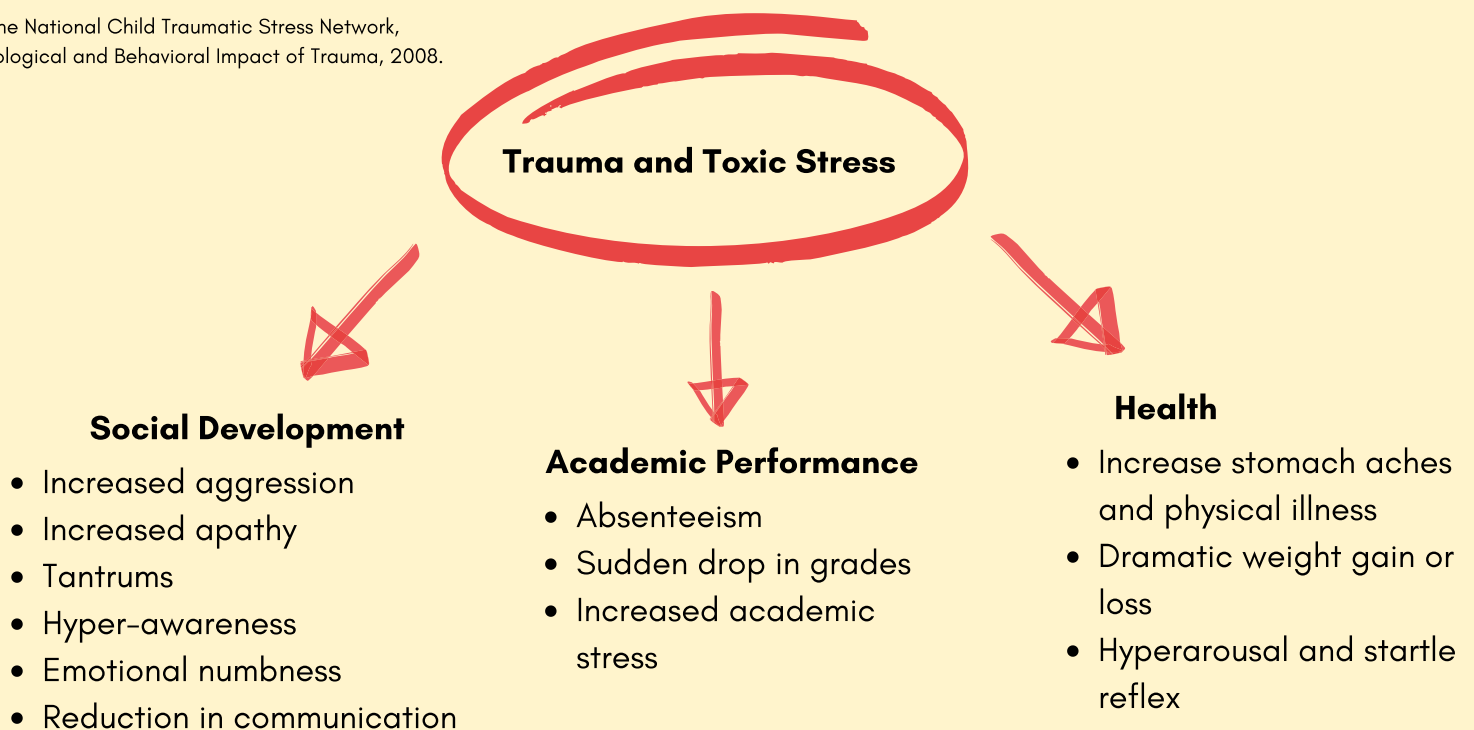
Some children with prolonged exposure to trauma may react to stress and change with the FIGHT response. Typical expressions of the FIGHT response include challenging social behaviors like tantrums, physical aggression, cursing, or hyperactivity. Other FIGHT responses include inattention to academic work, attention-seeking behavior during program hours, and negative health related actions like over and under eating.

Students experiencing trauma and toxic stress may also exhibit the FLIGHT response during stressful situations. The CDC highlights typical FLIGHT responses as self-isolation, depression, reduced interest in play or academics, and reductions in appetite. Students expressing FLIGHT responses may even attempt to sabotage relationships with peers or group leaders to keep from revisiting stressors like abandonment and abuse (CDC, 2019).

You must remember that students experiencing trauma and toxic stress may shift from FIGHT or FLIGHT responses throughout the program day. Students develop different responses based upon past interactions and events in their lives. Recognizing that these behaviors are coping mechanisms and not an attempt "to be bad" is necessary to help struggling students thrive.



The National Child Traumatic Stress Network,
Psychological and Behavioral Impact of Trauma, 2008.





Effects of trauma and toxic stress on staff?

Trauma and toxic stress are not limited to students. Teachers and staff in your program also experience the negative effects of trauma in their daily lives. Along with the CDC indicators listed above, adults constantly face new forms of toxic stress and trauma that can easily trickle into the classroom. Financial stress, poverty, transportation struggles, personal health, the wellness of family members, and other personal issues all have the ability to increase cortisol levels for staff members. Traumatic experiences like interpersonal staff disagreements, parent altercations, and overly loud school age classrooms can also trigger staff and create toxic stress situations.

As with students, staff dealing with personal trauma and toxic stress might respond by using their internal FIGHT response. This neurological response might manifest in the staff member arguing with others, yelling at students, and displaying signs of insubordination and confrontation. Staff resorting to their FIGHT response might also act manic in the classroom, constantly cleaning or shifting the group from one activity to another without warning.

Staff dealing with trauma and toxic stress can also display the FLIGHT response when dealing with a hard situation. This response might take the form of the staff member ignoring others, looking at their phone and social media instead of interacting with students, or failing to implement lesson plans and activities. Other signs of staff shifting to their FLIGHT response include chronic absenteeism, leaving work early, and failing to connect and communicate with students and other staff members.

It is essential that empathy and understanding are extended to everyone in your program...not just students. Take time to reflect on the mental health of the adults that work in your program, and any changes in their personality. They could be struggling with the effects of trauma.

Staff and Trauma...The Numbers

- Poverty is a common cause of trauma and toxic stress for school age providers in North Carolina. The average early education provider in North Carolina has a starting wage of \$10.50 an hour. This starting wage drops to an average of \$9.50 an hour for staff working in for-profit sites (CCSA, *Working in Early Education and Care in North Carolina*, 2019). The living wage in North Carolina for a family of four with two working adults is \$15.85 an hour (MIT, *Living Wage Calculator*, 2020).
- Personal and family health issues is a leading trauma stressor for North Carolina early education providers. Currently only 71% of early education employees have access to paid sick leave and only 48% of early education employees have some form of employer-subsidized health insurance (CCSA, 2019).
- Abuse is another leading cause of trauma and toxic stress for North Carolina school age providers. Between July 2019–July 2020 the North Carolina Department of Administration dealt with over 59,000 adult cases of abuse and violence. Of these reported cases, only 6.5% of cases were committed by strangers (NC Department of Administration, *2019–2020 Statistical Brief*, 2020).

Watch

One of the easiest ways to spot trauma in your school age program is by taking time to watch your students. Taking time to stop, sit, and watch provides the perfect opportunity to observe shifts in behavior and changes in personality.

Here are tips on how to maximize your observation skills in relation to trauma:

- Review your classroom schedule and find moments where you can sit with students and simply observe their play and interactions. Make an effort to highlight students showcasing behaviors that seem different.
- Carefully watch for any changes in the emotional reactions of students and staff. Does a child or staff member seem suddenly sad or depressed? Is a student suddenly showcasing signs of stress and worry when picked up by a particular caregiver? Watching for sudden emotional changes can highlight instances of trauma and toxic stress.
- Intentionally watch for physical signs of trauma and stress among students and staff. Look for indicators like rapid weight changes, lack of proper clothing, cleanliness, and bruises. Also watch for changes in behavior and potential spikes in aggression or agitation. These reactions can be physical expressions of trauma.
- Record any abnormal physical or emotional shifts that you observe, and communicate these changes in alignment with your school age policy.



Communicate

Open communication is an important element to recognizing school age trauma. Taking a moment to listen and talk to students and staff develops trusting relationships where trauma can be openly discussed.

Here are some easy ways to recognize school age trauma with positive communication:

- Sit with students during program hours and have a simple conversation. Students desire adult communication. Sitting down for a quick chat builds trust and helps students open up about potential stress.
- Take time to actively listen to staff and students. Do not brush others off when they talk to you, but truly listen to what they are saying. Taking time to listen relays openness, attentiveness, and empathy.
- Set aside time in the program day to just listen to student conversations. Many times, peer discussions shine light on student trauma.
- Make an effort to check in with other staff members. You might be the only outlet some coworkers have to communicate trauma.
- Develop group sharing sessions during the day where students and groups leaders have the ability to discuss a specific topic. Holding a five minute group chat at the beginning of the day might spur longer conversations about stress and trauma.



Connect

Recognizing trauma is a process. It is not a skill that you can master on your own. Instead, it requires constant growth and professional feedback. Making an effort to connect with other professionals and resources will help you develop your understanding of school age trauma and address it in your program.

Here are some ways that you can develop trauma informed skills through outside connection:

- Seek out professional development opportunities. Trainings on trauma, resiliency, and community development will heighten your ability to recognize trauma indicators and address these issues in a professional way.
- Bring in another set of eyes. Having input from other school age professionals will help you hone your trauma informed skills. Reach out to your local Child Care Resource and Referral agency (www.childcarerrnc.org) or DCDEE Licensing Consultant for support.
- Make an effort to connect with your families. Developing relationships with families can help highlight home-based trauma and stress students carry into the school age classroom.
- Encourage staff-wide relationship building. Staff meetings and staff teaching sessions build program-wide community. Staff dealing with trauma and toxic stress are more likely to share issues with co-workers they know and trust.

Take a second to think...

REFLECT: Is there any personal trauma that I bring into the classroom?

Are there times during the program day I can WATCH for signs of trauma and stress?

How can I better COMMUNICATE with students and co-workers?

Who can I CONNECT with to help develop my trauma informed skills?



North Carolina School Age Initiative

For more information or school age support contact

Jonathan Williams
Statewide School Age Program Coordinator
Email: williams.jon@swcdcinc.org
Phone: 828.450.9218