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Seeing Trauma Through the Lens of Effective Student Assistance Strategies

As the impact of trauma becomes more recognized as a significant factor in healthy youth development, school leaders are looking for proven strategies to help youth dealing with trauma effects become successful students. This article will explore working with trauma and trauma-impacted students through the lens of Student Assistance Program (SAP) processes.

K-12 school-based, evidence-informed frameworks that include prevention, early intervention, referral and support drive SAP programs and benefit schools. SAPs are the essence of an approach that carefully exposes the circumstances that students bring with them to the school environment. Trauma is often a forefront issue that is both a barrier to school achievement and a bridge to mental illness. Child trauma is the experience of an event by a child that is emotionally painful or stressful which often results in lasting mental and physical effects. It can include experiences such as homelessness, immigrant student concerns, trauma from community violence, unexpected death of a loved one, military family issues, sexual, physical or emotional abuse, neglect, poverty, natural disasters, terrorism and any number of incidents that students and families perceive as traumatic (Illinois State Board of Education, 2017).

The importance of SAP for the traumatized child is statistically relevant. It is known that 1 in 10 children in Illinois suffer from a mental illness (or related experience) enough to cause some level of impairment; yet in any given year only 20% of these children receive services. Student Assistance Programs are well known for working with students whose backgrounds and experiences prevent them from benefitting from the overall educational experience. SAP strengths lie in their ability to deal with non-academic barriers to learning. These can include

behavioral health, family, and relationship issues along with other trauma-related concerns. Through recognition and identification of traumatic experiences, Student Assistance Programs can build a trauma-informed environment within the school setting. Administrators and staff will then be able to meet students where they are. They will be able to develop safety-oriented, collaborative, and compassionate interactions and relationships with students. SAPs help school staff consider the needs of students who have experienced combined, multiple traumas. And, so, with an increase in trauma knowledge and skills comes a reduction in re-traumatization and an increase in asset building and resilience recognition.

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The school's role has changed over the past 50 years from a singular focus on education to becoming a primary source of meeting basic safety, physical and emotional needs in order to successfully address learning needs. Educators cannot assume that children have their physiological, safety, belonging, and esteem needs met, and that they are ready to learn simply because they are in school.

Traumatic experiences can impact and alter cognition. Perceiving the world as a place of worry and danger does not lend itself to experiencing school from a healthy, happy outlook. Learning becomes a distraction to the needed vigilance for survival. Victims put learning low on

the continuum of priorities necessary to maintaining sanity and safety. Children exposed to family violence, for instance, are more likely to develop social, emotional, psychological, and/or behavioral problems than those who are not. Recent research (Alabama Coalition Against Domestic Violence) indicates that children who witness domestic violence show more anxiety, low self-esteem, depression, anger, and temperament problems than children who do not witness violence in the home. The trauma they experience can show up in emotional, behavioral, and physical disturbances that affect their development educationally and can continue into adulthood.

SAPs are always prepared to deal with behaviors that are aggressive and regressive directly attributed to trauma. The SAP's goal is to discover what barriers to learning, other than skill deficits, are contributing to students' lack of school success, and identify the school and community resources necessary to get each student on track for successful school completion. First and foremost, Student Assistant Programs are meant to be bridges to existing in-school supports. SAP staff within the schools construct those bridges by utilizing the strengths and assets of each student; always acknowledging resilience within the individual. SAPs use skillfully facilitated school teams or coordinators to move each student forward, helping that child maneuver through life stressors and situations.

Student Assistance Programs deliver services at three levels: Universal, Selective, and Indicated. The heart of focus for SAP is at the Indicated level where SAPs foster healthy development of struggling students by implementing a planning process unique to SAPs for

nonacademic barriers to learning. The Selective level focuses on subsets of the population to address barriers to learning (risk factors) common to the subset. The Universal level addresses all students and staff in the building.

The first step in the SAP process is to identify students' critical needs and the system's existing resources. Conducting a comprehensive needs and resource assessment examines health risk behaviors such as violence and alcohol, tobacco and other drug use that can result in injury and /or impede positive development among youth, and will provide the SAP with valuable data that leads to creating a system of Universal, Selective, and Indicated services tailored to the needs of the school.

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In order to identify critical needs as indicated in that first step, it is important to consider the various forms and types of trauma. Natural traumas are those caused by nature such as the devastation of a tornado, an earthquake, or a blizzard. Diseases and other epidemics may plague a population, as may a concern like famine. Often, "Acts of God" are regionally-limited, affecting a group of people that the majority observe in their suffering via the media. Exposure to pervasive images of the disaster can drive trauma. For SAP personnel, it is necessary to pay attention to natural disasters. Youth may have family

members in the path of such disasters or it may create anxiety about the potential for similar events nearby.

If the event has occurred local to the student, the trauma is directly proportionate to the degree of devastation. Individual losses to life or possessions are of key importance and impact. The ability to reestablish routines and the availability and amount of resources to do that may determine the recovery process and its time frame and impact the trauma experience.

Generalized anxieties related to this kind of trauma may involve fears of looting, media attention, disruption of privacy, and health concerns due to changes in living environments and exposure to disease. Consequently, it is not only the event that is traumatizing, it is also the consequences of human behavior that play a role in reducing a victim's ability to access resiliency skills, establish personal assets, and move toward recovery.

Human-caused traumas can be initiated from human failure or by human design. These can include incidents such as a railway collapse or oil spill. Intentional human acts are often incidents like domestic violence, terrorism or school violence - again reported repeatedly with graphic detail for all ages to view. Students begin to worry that "Whatever happens 'out there' can happen here." (Illinois State Board of Education, 2017)

The trauma inflicted by such situations creates interesting barricades for the Student Assistance Program and the student survivor, which can include issues of trust with any adult seen as the establishment causing the event. It can mean increased school absences, an unwillingness to talk, and a lack of interest in spending time with SAP personnel. It can

also mean anger and outbursts which result in out-of-school consequences prohibiting the SAP from working with the child. When dealing with anger and teens, there is the worry by adults that the anger will spread among peers much like wildfire in a natural trauma might spread, increasing the difficulty of moving a child toward trauma recovery.

Some children, in addition to the traumas that exist worldwide, suffer their own personal traumas.

The human experience is wrought with negative occurrences.

These can include: mugging, rape, multiple

sexual assaults, life-threatening illness, or physical injury as well as chronic stress related to poverty. In the case of individual trauma, supports will naturally be less than collectively traumatized groups would receive. Survivors of individual trauma may not even seek validation as guilt and fear of continued abuse/trauma distorts their view of the world around them and themselves.

Friends of survivors may experience second-hand trauma when they cannot be effective in creating healthy environments or strategies for recovery for their victim friends. In cases of domestic violence, for instance, these bystanders may even fear for their safety as a helper. The circle of trauma continues and the abuser can traumatize and claim a second-hand victim in addition to his/her first target.

A feature unique to the Student Assistance process is a self and friend-referral system for personal issues. Students naturally will self-refer and friend refer for personal issues when they know there is a system

in place for the purpose of hope and help, that it is confidential, and that their concerns will be taken seriously.

Some youth have experienced developmental traumas: birth defects or illness, life threatening diseases, or injury. These may occur at key physical developmental stages, which subsequently influence later development and adjustment. Both physical and mental health can be impacted by the specific

life event and by the characteristic consequence of human response. Youth may be traumatized by bullying; taunts and stares, exclusion from activities

or social engagement, or simply the frustrations of their life struggles.

In addition to the multiple traumas that may present for youth, SAP may find themselves working hard to avoid system-oriented traumas. School settings may inadvertently re-traumatize a student. SAP personnel who help develop trauma - informed school environments will help others on staff understand:

- the existence and influence of trauma-related behaviors
- the need for appropriate reporting and communication among staff
- the value of considering trauma potential on existing trauma history when applying consequences for behavioral concerns
- the importance of non-confrontational approaches to academic deficits
- the necessity of reducing labels for feelings and behavior as pathological
- the provision of a safe physical plant and social environment

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- the establishment of open conversation with traumatized students about their needs
- the absolute necessity of consistent rules, policies and standards for behaviors

Student Assistance Programs make sure that students are understood, that no child slips through the cracks when services are needed, and that entire school teams are ready for the challenge of the trauma-experienced student. This involves creating a broad understanding of common behavioral responses to trauma and the ensuing reactions. SAPs can also be the best point of knowledge and contact for trauma specific therapeutic referrals.

Responses for survivors to trauma are often assigned to the umbrella of post-traumatic stress. Although each child is different and each traumatic stressor cannot practically be the same, there are some commonalities among reactions. SAPs have long made known the relationship between life events and depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and substance use and abuse. Some responses are within obvious signs and symptoms of mental illness, and others identify distress but not disorder. Emotional reactions vary greatly and can include fear, anger, sadness, and guilt or shame. The extent of these feelings and the manner in which they are acted upon can relate to the experience of age-continued trauma exposure, or levels of support. Some students may seem emotionless or disconnected. SAP personnel are always on the lookout for substance use and abuse, aggression, and

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self-harm; as well as other self-destructive behaviors. Trauma can be the driver for any or all of these.

SAP personnel may naturally utilize peer supports to encourage communication and socialization and connectedness. More regular meetings and group opportunities may increase a traumatized student's chances for finding health and recovery in the school environment.

The Universal Level

The Universal level of SAP services includes strategies that are focused on the entire population of the school for both students and adults. Strategies include policies, procedures, programs, and messages aimed toward building wellness and positive social-emotional skills while preventing or delaying the onset of problem

behaviors for 100% of the population. Educating staff is a key part in these strategies as some students experiencing trauma may identify themselves through tardies and

absences as indicators of their trauma experiences. These students may need some support understanding the strength in the connection between physical and emotional stress and pain. Youth may come to school exhausted from both eating and sleep disturbances related to the trauma. For a teacher to focus on the child as a learner without addressing the emotional needs reduces the potential outcomes for the curriculum and the student.

Universal policies and procedures must empower adults in the school to handle

situations that may impact the safety, health and well-being of not only individual students, but also everyone in the building.

The Selective Level

The Selective level of SAP services provides strategies targeted for any special subset of the student population whose characteristics factor for higher risk potential. These characteristics may include geographic factors such as communities with fewer services or norms that promote unhealthy behaviors; parental factors including substance abuse; grief issues, parental incarceration, teen pregnancy, homelessness, or gender issues.

SAP teams may be able to collaborate with outside resources to discuss the needs for community safety and psycho-education. Building resilience in students may result from adult mentors who provide needed trust in home communities and neighborhoods as places to receive care and support.

The Indicated Level

At the Indicated level of SAP services, strategies are focused on the individual student who is demonstrating early signs of danger that may lead to additional problems including substance abuse, violence, delinquency and school drop-out. Strategies are more targeted and may involve connection with community services for concerns outside the realm of school.

This level is a means for provision of individual and specialized referral for each child impacted by trauma who needs SAP support. SAP members are the key to guiding a committed strategy for creating health in students so they can return to academics and feel that success

at learning is a real probability. Students who experience SAP at this level will understand the strengths they possess and the protective factors that align them with improvement in academics. At this level in the SAP process, trauma-lived students have experienced, knowledgeable staff who are not just ready for trauma-related behaviors, but understand them. Students in SAP have been supported by community members and received life-enhancing referrals. Students at this level of the process will also continually be monitored by a knowledgeable faculty and the SAP for the pitfalls and setbacks of flashbacks and triggers related to trauma. In short, the SAP will be there to support the effects of trauma in the moment through the long term with the focused goal of comprehensive student success.

Trauma Champions

SAP team members are often trauma champions. What is a trauma champion? "A champion understands the impact of violence and victimization on the lives of people seeking mental health or addiction services and is a front-line worker who thinks 'trauma first.' When trying to understand a person's behavior, the champion will ask, 'is this related to abuse and violence?' A champion will also think about whether his or her own behavior is hurtful or insensitive to the needs of a trauma survivor. "The champion is there to do an identified job - he is a case manager or a counselor or a residential specialist - but in addition to his or her job, a champion is there to shine the spotlight on trauma issues" (Harris and Fallot, 2001). The impact of trauma leaves a wide berth for that spotlight. Students experience academic problems that reduce organizational skills, comprehension, memory, the ability to produce work, disengagement in the process of learning

and inattentiveness. Classroom behavior is affected and students are unable to remain calm and regulate their behavior; unable to process and read social cues. They may be unable and unwilling to respond to cues for behavioral improvement.

Relationships will suffer most for children who experience trauma with increased preoccupation for psychological and physical safety. Blanket distrust of adults and fellow students will not help these children develop socially without immense scarring.

Barriers to learning exist in large segments of the student population. Trauma is a fact of life, but it need not be a pervasive negative force in the life of a child. People can and do recover from mental illness and from trauma. Youth are especially resilient. In schools, it is often the Student Assistance Program that is the anchor; providing strategic direction for a process that establishes social-emotional successes for students. Student Assistance has historically been an effective vehicle in schools to address non-academic barriers to learning. "There is an abundance of evidence that most children in need of mental health services do not receive them, but those that do receive them, for the most part, receive them through the school system." (Burns, B, et al, 1995) "Because we cannot possibly build a separate response to any type of trauma, we must build program-wide practices that are trauma-informed" (Illinois State Board of Education, 2017). No one can remove the experience of trauma, but schools with Student Assistance Programs can ease the burden and restore hope for children who have suffered. SAPs can help create trauma-sensitive school environments where student needs are met and where whole teams are responsive to the support of the trauma-recovering child.

If you are interested in more information about effective evidence-based Student Assistance, visit www.prevention.org.

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