Chapter 9
Environmental Trauma

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ABSTRACT

The increase in prevalence of students impacted by environmental trauma is evident in classrooms all across the country. Nearly half of all U.S. children have been exposed to at least one traumatic event and more than 1 in 5 have been exposed to several. This environment often causes students to have extensive learning, social, and behavioral challenges. They fall behind academically, fail to develop healthy relationships with peers, or create problems with teachers and principals because they are unable to trust adults. In addition, these students often find solace in food, alcohol, drugs, sex, and other high-risk behaviors. Specifically, this chapter will help school professionals 1) define and explore the impact of trauma on the developing brain's ability to learn, 2) become aware of the prevalence of trauma exposure in today's classrooms, 3) describe how to implement trauma sensitive best practices in schools and classrooms, and 4) incorporate educator self-care and wellness practices within a trauma sensitive environment.

OBJECTIVES

This chapter will help school professionals:

1. Define and explore the impact of trauma on the developing brain's ability to learn.
2. Become aware of the prevalence of trauma exposure in today's classrooms.
3. Describe how to implement trauma sensitive best practices in schools and classrooms.
4. Incorporate educator self-care and wellness practices within a trauma sensitive environment.

CASE STUDY APPLICATIONS

As you read and engage with the information in this chapter, reflect on the following two case studies and apply the information. At the end of this chapter we will revisit and apply your new knowledge and understanding to initiate practices that can address the needs of these and other students

Case Study 1. Aaliyah

Aaliyah, a bright, loquacious student, began her 11th grade school year recovering from the shock of her brother's murder. The tragedy happened a week before the first day of school, and once she stepped in the building her teachers immediately noticed a change in her behavior. In her AP English Language class, she was no longer able to focus; instead she vacillated between intense fatigue and explosive outbursts at her teachers and fellow students. Though Aaliyah has always been an outspoken student, standing up for herself and others, her advocacy has taken on a more combative tone. In speaking with her, Aaliyah noted that her brother was not the first person she has known to be killed.

Aaliyah lives in the city's poorest zip code. In her neighborhood, there is a lack of access to fresh food, few city sponsored resources, and violence is often in the background. Skirmishes are settled through physical or gun violence, and at times, individuals are injured or killed in the crosshairs. While some of the issues that plague the community spill over to the school she attends, it is her safe haven. She is able to feel her full range of emotions at school, and after the loss of her brother, the teachers, counselors, and administration see it all.

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