

# TRAUMA INFORMED CLASSROOMS FOR ELL STUDENTS

Oakland Unified School District, June 25, 2015

# Trauma

An experience (or extreme threat) of physical or psychological harm or the severe withholding of resources for healthy development

- Trauma can be terrifying or painful. It can provoke intense fear, helplessness or horror.
- Trauma overwhelms our capacity to regulate internal states. In a traumatic experience we cannot process or integrate what is happening.

# Types of Trauma

- Acute Trauma
- Chronic Trauma in country of origin
- Complex Trauma
- Vicarious or Secondary Trauma
- Trauma of acculturation
  - ▣ Adolescent culture here vs in home country
  - ▣ Victimization
  - ▣ Fear and inhibited help seeking
  - ▣ Economic/emotional/social situation
  - ▣ Role change in a new country
- PTSD – what is it?

# PTSD: Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

- Exposure to actual or threat of death, serious injury, or sexual violence.
- Symptoms may include: repetitive play (children), recurrent dreams, flashbacks, distress at exposure to cues recalling the event, hyperarousal, avoidance of stimuli associated with the event, negatively altered cognitions, depressive symptoms, anxiety, depersonalization/derealization.

DSM-5: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders – Fifth Edition

American Psychiatric Association

# Survival Brain vs. Learning Brain

- We all have normal alarm systems in our brain/body that let us know when we are under threat and mobilize us to fight, flee (flight) or freeze in the face of a threat.
- When youth experience continuous threats/trauma, the brain/body is put into a chronic state of fear, activating the “survival brain” (mid/lower areas of the brain).

# Key Insight:

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- Because of constant exposure to violence and trauma, children and youth can become locked into a permanent state of Fight/Flight.
- This makes these children and youth react to normal experiences as if they were life and death threats.
- This is not a rational/cognitive process. It is wired into their physiological response.

# Trauma Impacted Youth

May have difficulty with:

- Managing “big” emotions
- Chronic irritability/anxiety that interferes with problem solving
- Empathy
- Expressing concerns/needs in words
- Taking into account the wider context of a situation
- Appreciating how one’s behavior impacts other people
- Working in groups/connecting with others

# Survival Response: Fight, Flight or Freeze

**Fight:** Youth struggle to regain or hold onto power, especially when feeling coerced.

- ❑ Youth often mislabeled as “non-compliant” or “combative”.

**Flight:** Youth disengages or runs away and “checks out” emotionally.

- ❑ Youth often mislabeled as “uncooperative” or “resistant”

**Freeze:** Youth gives in to those in positions of power; does not, or is unable to “speak up.”

- ❑ Youth often mislabeled as “passive” or “unmotivated”

# Trauma Triggers

Common Triggers include:

- Unpredictability
- Sudden changes/transitions
- Loss of control
- Sensory overload
- Feeling vulnerable
- Confrontation

# The Trauma Informed Approach At School:

- Recognizes and understands that certain behaviors are related to traumatic experience and uses this recognition and understanding to drive a new set of practices at school with young people who exhibit these sets of behaviors.
- Shifts from a model that asks, “What is wrong with you?” to one that asks, “What happened to you?” and “How can I shift the school environment and classroom practices to respond more effectively to your needs?”

# Fostering Resiliency: 6 Core Strengths for Healthy Development

1. **Attachment:** making relationships
2. **Self regulation:** containing impulses
3. **Affiliation:** being part of a group
4. **Attunement:** being aware of others
5. **Tolerance:** accepting differences
6. **Respect:** Finding value in differences

Bruce Perry, M.D., Ph.D.

# Changing Behavior & Fostering Learning

- Routines – create safety and predictability. Help regulate nervous system.
- Rituals – are routines with meaning. Create feelings of belonging and connection.
- Regulation - the ability to monitor and control our behavior, emotions, or thoughts, altering them based upon what the situation demands.
- Relationships – the key to learning! Connection, affection, attunement, interaction, and respect.

# School-wide programs aligned with trauma informed care in schools:

- Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)
- Restorative Justice
- Mindfulness Practices
- Skills Streaming
- Comprehensive School Based Health Centers
- Referrals to Community Based Services