

What Can Schools Do to Support Children Affected by the Opioid Crisis?

The United States is facing an unprecedented opioid epidemic: In 2017, more than 72,000 Americans died from opioid-related overdoses, more than any other year in record¹. Substance use disorders, including opioid misuse disorder, have a profound impact on the individuals who suffer from them directly; they also have substantial ripple effects on the families and communities of which they are a part. Included in these groups, though often absent from the headlines, are the thousands of children traumatized by the consequences of addiction in their homes.

The adverse impact of opioid addiction and overdoses on children are significant. In the long term, these children have an increased likelihood of experiencing lifelong mental, physical, and behavioral consequences, including social and cognitive impairment, risky behavior—including substance misuse later in life, and higher incidence of disease. In the short term, these children often struggle with emotional, social, and behavioral adjustments—including developing mental health conditions like anxiety, and demonstrating difficult behaviors.

Schools are uniquely positioned to address the needs of this growing population. They can offer the safe and supportive environments and relationships that trauma-exposed children often lack at home. They can also help to ensure that these children get the services they need to work through their emotional struggles—whether these services are provided within the school walls or through referrals to outside agencies.

To effectively address the needs of trauma-exposed children, schools must undergo a cultural shift from traditional practices that focus solely on student academic achievement to those that focus on supporting the whole child, including their psychological and emotional needs. Although there isn't a one-size-fits-all approach for making this transition or achieving positive outcomes, below are some common themes that have emerged from those schools that have been most successful.

- **Involve all staff.** Trauma-informed practices can't be the responsibility of just one person (such as the school counselor) or one team (the health educators). Rather, every adult in the building, from the custodian or school secretary who greets the student at the door to

¹ Rudd, R.A., Seth P., David, F., Scholl, L. (2016). Increases in Drug and Opioid-Involved Overdose Deaths — United States, 2010–2015. *MMWR Morbidity Mortal Weekly Report* 65:1445–1452. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm655051e1>

the coaches and instructors who work with them after the final bell—need to understand and appreciate what it takes to be a trauma-sensitive school, and the important role they play in this process. When provided with adequate training, all staff can learn to identify changes in behaviors or moods that might indicate the presence of trauma in the home and help to create a safe and supportive school environment.

- **Dedicate time to getting buy-in.** Shifting from traditional to trauma-sensitive practices requires the buy-in of all staff members and a willingness to adopt new approaches. To facilitate this shift, take time to lay the groundwork. Meet with district and school leadership and other key stakeholders. Be prepared to make a case for why this approach is needed. Anticipate concerns and be ready to address them. And whenever possible, use data to help tell your story: quantitative, if you have it, but qualitative data as well, such as anecdotes from teachers and other staff who have experienced, first-hand, the impact of trauma on their students.
- **Start with the science.** Programs that are well-supported by research are more likely to produce the positive results you are looking for. Over the past decade, a growing body of research has emerged on the linkages between early childhood trauma and academic/health outcomes. This research has informed the development of a broad array of interventions focused on promoting pro-social behaviors, healthy coping skills, and preventing risky behaviors associated with exposure to trauma. When considering an appropriate program, make sure to consider fit. Your selected program should be age- and culture-appropriate, feasible to implement given available resources and staffing, and readily infused into existing curricula and systems. Some organizations that provide information on evidence-based trauma-informed interventions are the [Treatment and Services Adaptation Center](#), [Education Law Center](#), and [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#).
- **Implement multiple programs that reinforce one another.** Combine interventions that support the trauma-exposed child directly, such as support groups and individualized counseling programs, with activities designed to change the culture of the school overall, such as classroom-based programs to increase socio-emotional competencies like empathy, and school policies aimed at supporting students exhibiting problem behaviors rather than punishing them. This type of holistic, multi-tiered approach helps to ensure that every child receives the level of care that he or she needs while providing a safety net of support for all students.

- **Don't operate in isolation.** Explore opportunities for collaborating with other community services such as mental health clinics, healthcare centers, and law enforcement—these connections will help to ensure that the children in your care receive the wrap-around services they need to thrive. Some excellent examples of school-community partnerships to support children experiencing trauma include [Kids Like Us](#), a program in Frederick County, Maryland that partners local mental health clinicians with schools, and [Handle with Care](#), in which law enforcement officials in West Virginia notify school officials when they become aware of a child being exposed to a traumatic event such as domestic violence incident or a drug overdose in the home.

Trauma-informed approaches can make a significant difference in the lives of children whose lives have been disrupted by the devastation caused by the opioid epidemic. While the magnitude of the problem is enormous, well planned and executed interventions can play a critical role in supporting these children, and helping them develop the skills and behaviors needed to lead healthy lives.

For information about PreventionSolutions@EDC's work addressing the needs of trauma-exposed children, contact Training and Technical Assistance Specialist Shai Fuxman at sfuxman@edc.org.