Why We Need Trauma-Informed Schools

In the mid-1990’s, the United States Congress, along with several states, passed laws with the intention of reducing violence, notably gun violence, in schools. These laws not only encourage harsh punishments but, in many cases, mandate them. Following the implementation of these laws, there was a rise in out-of-school suspensions and expulsions. The unfortunate fall-out for our most behaviorally-challenged students is lost educational opportunities and the labeling of them as delinquents and criminals. Additoinally, two decades of research shows no evidence that these laws and mandates have improved school safety or student behaviors.

These zero-tolerance policies are the least trauma-informed policies ever put into practice in our schools. They ignore the mental and emotional needs of the most vulnerable of students in our schools and allow absolutely no understanding to the individual needs of students. Ironically, the students who need the most help are punished, judged, and pushed away, which only works to deepen their trauma-related issues.

Trauma research is giving us answers as to why these earlier policies do not work. Neuroscience is showing how the brain is impacted when children grow up in stressful environments. Their brains are wired differently, they think from a platform of fear, and they have negative belief systems about themselves and the world in which they live. This creates challenges within the framework of our traditional disciplinary models. The result is that we are failing our students and asking them to be like all the “normal” kids yet they are neurologically unequipped to be able to do so.

For many of our students, they have experienced years of toxic stress in their home environments that shifted them into living every moment of every day in survival mode. Their new “normal” is fear, reactivity, and failure. This is how they have survived. It is all they know. The result is that their brains are wired for fear...their brains are not “bad” and their reactivity isn’t necessarily “wrong.” They are products of their environments. They have survival brains and that’s how they enter their classrooms every day. What science is showing us, is that this is a brain issue, not a behavioral issue.

Using a trauma-informed approach within our schools is the answer. It is an approach that implements an understanding of trauma into the everyday practices and policies of an academic environment. Using a trauma-informed approach means changing how we interact with students and how we implement discipline in a way that is modified to be responsive to the impact of traumatic stress. A program that is “trauma-
informed” operates within a framework that incorporates an understanding of the ways in which trauma impacts an individual’s socio-emotional health.

Students who have been impacted by trauma carry a very heavy load and they operate at a perpetual high level of stress. For most, their trauma wasn’t a one-time incident…it didn’t happen overnight. It happened and continues to happen on a perpetual and long-term basis.

Children have a natural love for learning, yet what we as a collective society have forgotten is that children are first emotional beings. They operate at an emotional level, not an intellectual level. That’s the definition of being a child.

A survey was created by the Beyond Consequences Institute (BCI) to ask the opinions of students regarding what they need at school to make learning better. Students from first to twelfth grade completed the survey and their answers gave profound insights into the needs of these students. Only 2% of the students made suggestions regarding actual academic improvements. The remaining answers focused on suggestions to meet their social and emotional needs.

The students’ responses centered on identifying ways the school could meet their physiological needs, safety concerns, relationship needs, and self-esteem needs. The collective responses from all the students created a similar framework to psychologist Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory. Maslow suggested that the needs of individuals must be met before they will have a strong desire for improving themselves and moving forward in their growth. In order of priority, Maslow theorized that individuals must have their physiological, safety, love/belonging, and esteem needs met prior to being motivated at the self-actualization level. He also believed that when these basic needs are deficient in one’s life, the feelings of being anxious and tense are typically present.

Taking this framework of human motivation developed by Maslow, the same basic principles can be applied directly to the student in the classroom. The “Hierarchy of Learning” pyramid describes why we need to have a trauma-informed approach in our schools.
Instead of addressing the top of the pyramid, which is what we have traditionally done, we must first address everything below the top in order to ultimately reach the top of the pyramid. Trusting the process of meeting the social and emotional needs of our students to achieve high test-scores and successful graduation rates is the ultimate in making the shift to a trauma-informed school.

**Heather T. Forbes, LCSW**, is the owner of the Beyond Consequences Institute and author of numerous books on the topic of working with children impacted by trauma. Coming from a family of educators, Heather has a passion for helping children in the classroom. Trauma robs children of their curiosity, and Heather’s passion is to help these students return back to their innate love for learning. She consults and lectures extensively with both general and special education schools around the nation and internationally. Her signature style is to bridge the gap between academic research and “when the rubber hits the road” classroom situations, giving teachers and school personnel the understanding and tools they need for even the most challenging of students. Heather has worked in schools with trauma-impacted students and knows firsthand how challenging it can be, on a daily basis, interacting with these students. Much of her insight on understanding trauma, disruptive behaviors, and developmental delays, comes from her own experience of raising two internationally adopted children and mentoring a severely trauma-impacted young adult.
Books by Forbes:

1. *Classroom180: A Framework for Creating, Sustaining, and Evaluating the Trauma-Informed Classroom*
3. *Help for Billy: A Beyond Consequences Approach for Helping Challenging Children in the Classroom*
7. *Beyond Consequences, Logic, and Control: A Love Based Approach to Helping Children With Severe Behaviors, Volume 2*
8. *Dare to Love: The Art of Merging Science and Love Into Parenting Children with Difficult Behaviors*
9. *100 Daily Parenting Reflections*