

Discussion Paper 13

Trans-generational trauma and engaging families in the educational setting

Introduction

This discussion paper is one in a series designed to stimulate discussion, and sharing of experience, amongst staff in educational settings working with children who may have experienced complex relational trauma.

The paper compliments and extends training provided through the SMART program—an initiative of the South Australian Government Department of Education and Children’s Services

This paper specifically focuses on engaging the families of traumatized children in the context of the school’s role in their community and in the work that the school does within that community. Also to be addressed is the issue of trans-generational trauma and how an educational setting can work with parents of traumatized children, who may have been traumatized themselves.

The aim of this paper is to provide educators with an understanding of the effects of trans-generational trauma as a compliment to what has been learnt about the neurobiology of trauma and working with traumatized children in the school environment. Adding the component of parental trauma to the equation can promulgate further complexities to the relationship between family and school. With the SMART PRACTICE framework in mind, the aim is to address how educational settings offer a calming and engaging environment that will build school, family and community connectedness?

Trans-generational trauma

The term 'trans-generational' is connected with the concepts of inheritance, transmission and genealogy. Trans-generational trauma is passed down from one generation to another. This type of trauma "occurs without direct stimulus but is instead transmitted from a parent who has experienced a traumatizing event" (Davidson & Mellor, 2001 as cited in Goodman, West & Cirecie, 2008).

Trans-generational trauma was first studied in the context of how the Nazi Holocaust survivor's children were impacted by the stories and behaviours of their parents. In addition, children whose parents suffered from domestic violence and abuse as children themselves have been investigated and the impacts have been noted in terms of familial transference. This suggests that environmental factors, such as experiences of trauma, have significant impacts in subsequent generations. Atkinson (2008) found a unique line of evidence in her 2002 mapping of six-generation traumagram, "that the presence of unacknowledged or unresolved trauma in previous generations was linked to dysfunction in later generations of an extended family" (Atkinson, Nelson & Atkinson 2008, p.3)

There is also some emerging hypotheses exploring possible genetic connections between PTSD and other disorders such as Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Borderline Personality disorder, Panic disorder and alcohol and drug dependence. (O'Brien 2004) The study hypothesised there was a strong statistical relationship that suggested that these were manifested by PTSD but that they were also causal in their children. According to Milroy 2005 (in Atkinson, Nelson & Atkinson, p. 4), the impacts of trans-generational trauma are varied but have an effect on:

- The attachment relationship with caregivers
- The impact of parenting and family functioning
- The association of parental physical and mental illness
- Disconnection and alienation from extended family, culture and society

Duran & Duran (1998) suggest that historical trauma becomes "embedded in the cultural memory of a people" and as such is passed down from one generation to the next until it becomes normalized.

These key concepts around transgenerational trauma, coupled with a child's own experiences of trauma portray the complexity of the traumatized child in the classroom, and outline some of the challenges that might be experienced in engaging parents with the school community.

How do we construct meaning from this in our schools and how do we encourage a sense of connectedness within the school community if we have a population who are suffering the effects of trans-generational trauma? Such trauma can leave a person feeling distrusting, disconnected and distanced from others. Our role in the school is to attempt to reconnect people with community, build a trusting relationship

with school personnel and bridge a gap that allows for more positive relationships between family, school and child. In doing this, the school may well assist people to regain a sense of hope, renew or strengthen family dynamics, allow for the opportunity for positive and affirmed contribution to their child's education and the school community. Therefore they may be able to develop attuned and reciprocal relationships. All of these things can help one heal from the 'injury' of trauma.

Enhancing family involvement

When family members engage with a school, staff and teachers, "students adjust more easily to classroom teachers" in all levels of schooling "resulting in improved student performance says Auerbach, 2007 (in Ferguson 2008). Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davis (2007 p.1) contend that "(p)artnerships among schools, families and community groups are not a luxury – they are a necessity". With this concept and the SMART PRACTICE framework in mind, how might schools provide an engaging and calming school environment for parents and families- particularly those who have suffered the effects of trauma and possibly trans-generational trauma themselves.

CALMING

- Consider what the school may **feel** like for a person to visit who may have a trauma overlay.
- Does the environment welcome people? How?
- Do you have private areas for discussion? What do these look like? Are there comfortable furnishings, soft light, pleasant smells resonating?
- Is the environment quiet and gentle or raucous and noisy?
- Can the visitor be shown hospitality; tea, coffee, water etc?
- Is there any reading material in a waiting area that may highlight great things about this educational setting?

ENGAGING

- The most influential factor in involving and engaging families in school connectedness is the way the school welcomes and reaches out to families. (Hoover & Dempsy, et al, 2005) This has to occur regardless of the context, language, culture. If this occurs there is evidence to suggest that this correlates strongly with direct family involvement in children's education (Quiocho & Daoud, 2006 in Ferguson, 2008)
- Work towards building trust through open discussion and dialogue by creating a safe environment
- Teachers have to be empowered to involve and engage families

- Foster an inclusive educational environment; regardless of socio-economic status, language or cultural difference. It may be a communal lunch where members of one cultural community group share food, music, dance, costume etc with others and then continue to differing members of the community
- Engage in parent/child bonding evening: father/daughter, mother/son quiz/dinner/activity evenings
- Ensure positive and open communication- personal, letter, email, phone. Perform surveys about parental satisfaction, using a range of methods, and gain suggestions for improvement of community and their desires
- Include information for parents about issues pertaining to developmental stages and components of children's behaviour in a weekly newsletter.
- Be prepared to make face-face home visits to develop trust in relationship
- Engage parents in various support groups for their children's activities: play, musical, energy challenges, sporting activities
- Have information evenings to inform parents of pertinent information
- Have celebratory evening for school performance and school achievement
- Promote a community evening for fun
- Develop a cultural mural or artwork for the school ground which acknowledges all creeds and cultures within the community
- Have events where parents can come and go in their own time eg: a ten minute chat or a two hour session where they don't feel confined to the environment if they may not feel totally comfortable
- Give predictable and consistent messages in the various communication forms, that allow for further parental connection
- Engage with parents in a discussion about their own school experience. This can be done in a casual manner and may allow for an understanding which will assist planning in consideration of these parents
- Consider using settings away from school for school events to cater for some of those parents who struggle being in the actual school grounds

These are just a few ideas. Consider whether they would work in your school community. Do you have any other ways to engage families?

Questions for Consideration

- What strategies and practices does your school use to support families who have experienced trans-generational trauma?
- What strategies and practices does your school use to engage families to build a stronger school/home/community connectedness that will enhance outcomes for your students?
- As a teacher, what experiences have you had in dealing with a traumatized parent? How did you deal with this? How did it affect you?
- What does it mean to engage with traumatized adults who are the parents of the children you work with? What supports might you require for this?
- What values do you hold as an educator about the parenting role and family involvement in school?
- Consider your perceptions about some families within the school community and how this perception might affect the educational outcomes for a child.
- How might this affect your connectedness with those who have experienced trans-generational trauma?