

What You Need to Know.

by Dr. Stuart Shanker

Self-Regulation: The Impact of Trauma

Trauma and the brain

To this day, many children are still experiencing the effects of the trauma that their grandparents and parents went through in residential schools. Other events in a child's life can also be traumatic and have a similar long-term impact. Understanding why and how trauma affects the brain can help children overcome these effects and have a full and rewarding life.

A really good way to understand the effect of trauma is to think about what happens when your body gets really cold. The brain starts trying to "turn up the heat" in order to prevent hypothermia. First, you start to shiver. A small center in the brain sends a signal to the muscles to start vibrating in order to generate heat. Your heart rate and blood pressure and even your breathing rate go up for this purpose. But all this burns a lot of energy. So the brain turns off some body functions in order to keep going. All that matters is to keep you warm enough to protect the brain from getting damaged by the cold. Things like digestion, blood flow to your fingers and toes, and even parts of the brain that we use to pay attention, make decisions and control impulses are all slowed down in order to conserve energy.

Whatever the trauma, whether social, emotional, psychological or physical—including the experiences of residential school survivors and their families—the effect on the brain is

similar. The brain adapts to protect itself from the stress that trauma produces. Certain parts of the brain are placed on high alert, while other parts become much less active. This has a significant impact on a child's ability to control emotions, stay calm, pay attention, be less impulsive and form healthy relationships. Even fairly ordinary events, like going to a supermarket or sitting in a classroom, can be very hard for a child that has experienced the effects of trauma.

Signs of trauma-related stress

When children are in the heightened stress state produced by trauma, they often:

- Seem to be sad a lot of the time, or don't demonstrate any emotion at all
- Develop a hair-trigger (easily disrupted) response to stress, like a car alarm that goes off when a leaf lands on it
- See neutral facial expressions and even friendly remarks as threats
- Have problems regulating strong negative emotions—not just anger, but also fear, sadness, loneliness and shame
- Demonstrate a significant increase in impulsivity and distractibility
- Have trouble anticipating consequences and evaluating risk
- Are prone to withdrawal or aggression

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- Don't seem to feel empathy or have a sense of right and wrong.

The first and most important step for dealing with these behaviours is to recognize that they do NOT mean that the child lacks selfcontrol or is trying to be disobedient. Such problems are not the result of choice, but because the child is burning so much energy dealing with the effects of trauma on the brain that there isn't enough left over to regulate thoughts, emotions and actions. So you need to see these behaviours as signs that the stress levels on this youngster are too high and need to be reduced.

Strategies for addressing trauma-related stress

Five key strategies for helping children suffering from the effects of trauma are:

- Providing the greatest possible feeling of safety and security in the home
- Supporting them in becoming aware of and able to express their emotions
- Encouraging them to become "Stress Detectives," able to identify and reduce the things they find stressful
- Helping them learn and become aware of what it feels like to be calm
- Turning time when they are becoming agitated into learning experiences, so they can identify and activate what helps them to calm down.

Next steps

With support for parents and children, these are proven steps towards having happier and healthier children. The results can happen fast as children learn these strategies. Talk to your doctor or community nurse, connect with the child's teacher, contact The MEHRIT Centre at info@self-reg.ca or visit www.selfreg.ca for further information.

