

Prevention Through Collaboration: Family Engagement With Rural Schools and Families Living in Poverty

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Many families living in rural poverty endure toxic stress and trauma, contributing to challenges in engaging with their children's schools. Rural schools also face challenges in partnering with these families. Family engagement as a prevention approach, implemented by a team of social workers in collaboration with a rural school district, is presented as a case example to describe an emerging model. The conceptual framework, developed through a community-based participatory research approach, is (a) strengths-based, to support and enhance the parents' existing capacity; (b) trauma-informed, to understand and respond to the physiological and psychosocial impact of toxic stress; and (c) systems-focused, to facilitate change within the school system to make it responsive to the families' needs and strengths.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- This study demonstrates ways in which trauma-informed practices can be applied to mezzo- and macro-level services.
- Lessons learned from these efforts show that initial systems change can occur with outreach to a small sample of hard-to-reach families, potentially creating system readiness for larger change.

The social worker and master of social work program
(MS)

a full-time licensed social worker based in the school district who supervises four SW interns, each of whom spends 15 hours a week on-site, dividing their time equally between providing school-based services to students and outreach in the community.

The social work team initially conducted a “windshield assessment,” driving through the communities served by the school district to identify visible factors of strength and need. School personnel identified the rural Pleasant Grove trailer park as an area with high poverty, disengaged parents, and many children receiving special education services, but cautioned against conducting outreach there due to perceived danger and violence. The team’s windshield assessment confirmed the residents’ poverty; talking to the community members uncovered their skepticism about the school, and also showed their strengths as a group of caring parents with high hopes for their children.

School administrators have been supportive of the initiative from the beginning. The superintendent allocated Title 1 money to support activities, provided space for meetings, arranged for bus transportation so the parents could get to meetings when their transportation failed, and encouraged other administrators and leaders to support the endeavor. Despite their support, however, most school administrators and staff were also skeptical. Their doubts began to ease by



stated that the parents in this demographic did not for them and helps prepare the next generation of so care about their children, listing examples of what they special workers in this practice model. considered evidence. The examples, however, often illustrate a lack of communication with parents or lack of understanding of their circumstances that generates school personnel. While there remain indications of mutual misunderstanding, the teachers did not understand an us-versus-them attitude, parents also demonstrate that these parents have similar concerns about performance and behavior, and share the same goals of educational success and graduation for their children. A trust may be an indication that if school personnel are trauma-informed approach created opportunities for seen making contact in the families' social milieu, the school personnel to question their assumptions about school culture may be perceived as more welcoming parents' behavior, and develop dialogue that moved toward helping parents build social capital and the general school personnel through this work improves their reiteration of solutions.

A trauma-informed understanding also helps explain some of the difficulties that arise in communication with people dealing with toxic stress. The Pleasant Grove parents' conversation style is not linear, sometimes making it difficult to understand their meaning. Their voices are often loud and they use profanity freely, which can be interpreted as aggressive, putting those on the receiving end on the defensive. Initial systems change can occur even with outreach teachers do attempt to communicate with the parents but appear to give up when the parent continues to be experienced as "difficult." Those who do not have an understanding of the physiological impact of trauma and toxic stress most likely do not realize that the parent may have been triggered or moved into a state of heightened response by a stressful situation perceived as dangerous by an overtaxed biological system. One lesson learned from these efforts have shown that those on the receiving end on the defensive. Initial systems change can occur even with outreach teachers do attempt to communicate with the parents but appear to give up when the parent continues to be experienced as "difficult." Those who do not have an understanding of the physiological impact of trauma and toxic stress most likely do not realize that the parent may have been triggered or moved into a state of heightened response by a stressful situation perceived as dangerous by an overtaxed biological system. One lesson learned from this phase of the work is the use of language to support a social construction process. For example, referring to Pleasant Grove as a mobile home community instead of a trailer park helped reframe their stigmatized living environment as a community or neighborhood. Allowing parents to share their experience through storytelling, sensitive to their daily stresses. Likewise, parents need to find ways to communicate in order to "be heard" by school personnel. Supporting parents in developing and participating in the IFT helped them develop skills for such communication, and is an example of lessons learned by parents.

Home visits and outreach in a rural community can be a critical part of a prevention approach for school personnel. Activities such as walking through a neighborhood, knocking on doors, and saying "hello" make a big difference. When school personnel get to know the neighborhood, their students live in, community members begin to see school personnel as caring people willing to leave their safe confines, and a disengaged parents in any school could benefit from a similar approach to prevention, and social workers be fostered. Those with social capital become more connected to the community, healing relationships promote a reduction of toxic stress for residents. Employing social work interns who were initially reticent to participate in these efforts provides lessons learned

Limitations

The authors are expanding their research efforts to continue developing the model, but there are limitations inherent in the current process. The sample size is very small, most of the people have been known to one another or are related to one another, and they all identify as White Americans. While these families represent a segment of the population of financially poor rural communities, there is tremendous diversity in the larger population that is not captured here. People who identify with other races and cultures would be expected to have different experiences with toxic stress, including racism-related stress, and some different concerns with regards to communication and engagement with their children's school. The core components of the model, however, can be applied to different groups of parents with potential positive results.

Next Steps for Practice, Policy, Education, and Research

The social work team, with a new cohort of MSW interns, continues its engagement work with the families of Pleasant Grove and surrounding communities in the school district. EPR continues to add data and inform the model. Trauma-informed methods are integrated into MSW field instruction. Based on lessons learned thus far, the next steps are to: (a) include formal training on the integration of components informed by the Sanctuary Model as appropriate to a school setting (Bloom, 1995) for MSW interns; (b) formalize a common language that directs the path to healing that can be linked with existing school climate/bully prevention work also being conducted at the school; and (c) collaborate with the districts' social workers and the bully-prevention team to integrate trauma-informed methods

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