

When Schools Meet Trauma With Understanding, Not Discipline (Transcript)

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DAVID GREENE, HOST: Here are a few numbers about New Orleans and its kids. About 40 percent live in poverty. The city consistently ranks among the highest in the U.S. for murder. And more than half of children report they have been affected by homicide. Louisiana also leads the nation in incarceration, meaning many children have parents locked up. Given all of that, kids in New Orleans show signs of post-traumatic stress disorder at three times the rate of the average nationally. Now, a handful of schools are changing the way they work with kids. Educators there are trying to understand the role of trauma. Here's reporter Eve Troeh.

EVE TROEH, BYLINE: It's second period on a Wednesday morning. Principal Nicole Boykins is posted up in the hallway at Crocker elementary.

NICOLE BOYKINS: It is 9:44 and I am monitoring the halls. No, sir, Lawrence.

TROEH: Boykins makes constant corrections - tuck in your shirt, stop running.

BOYKINS: Hey, hey, hey, hey, Travis, come all the way back to the start. Now try it again.

TROEH: A teacher walks up with a third grader. He's fuming. She hands him off to Boykins. He just doesn't want to be in class, won't participate.

BOYKINS: Shane, what's up?

SHANE: I don't want to be in class.

BOYKINS: So what do you want to do? What would you like to do? Like, you can't - we can't - we just had your mom up here - was that Thursday?

TROEH: The boy takes off, runs into the stairwell. Boykins dashes after him. Boykins gets on a walky-talky for more help.

BOYKINS: Mr. Fischer, come in.

TROEH: She might call in three or four school staff members to tag team in a situation like this. It can take hours to get one struggling student like Shane back on track.

BOYKINS: Shane is struggling because Dad was recently sentenced to 20 years.

TROEH: For the past two years, Crocker has built tools to help students who are dealing with trauma like losing a parent to prison. Two full-time staff social workers hold one-on-one sessions, teachers send disruptive students to a room called the wellness center for a meditative time out that's not punishment. If students fight, they first work it out through group discussion with school staff. Kids who act up or shut down get long talks, extra support, not the detention or suspension they used to get. The idea is to tend to life troubles at school instead of sending kids home.

PAULETTE CARTER: A kid who's been exposed to trauma, you know, their survival brain, that fight or flight response, is much more developed and stronger.

TROEH: Paulette Carter helps Crocker manage its trauma-informed program. She's president of the Children's Bureau of New Orleans, a mental health agency. Experts like her have learned a lot in recent years about how trauma changes the brain and how that shows up in behavior. If a child throws a chair or suddenly storms out of the classroom...

CARTER: Maybe there's a threat that they perceived. If I'm walking down the hallway and somebody bumps into me, I'm going to say, oh, sorry, excuse me, whereas a kid who's been exposed to trauma on an ongoing basis, that might be a threat. And that part of the brain that's reasoning and logic shuts down.

TROEH: Carter leads training sessions to help school staff recognize when behavior might relate back to trauma. It's a check on whether discipline is the best response. Principal Boykins says it falls to her to reinforce this approach.

BOYKINS: We had a student the other day walk from Elysian Fields to Crocker.

TROEH: That's miles away. She says he's 15, a seventh grader who's had to repeat several years of school while other kids his age are in high school.

BOYKINS: Like, his life is a punishment. And so I could give him a 30-minute lunch detention, but do you really think that that is going to remedy what his issues are?

TROEH: Student trauma is just one of many issues at Crocker. The school's academic performance score was already a D, and it slipped a few points further this year. But Boykins believes addressing trauma can eventually boost academics because in New Orleans, kids' lives are not getting easier. And the more schools help, the more students stay in class learning. For NPR News, I'm Eve Troeh.

Debrief Questions:

Respond in thoughtful short paragraphs (3-5 sents.) in your notebook.

1. What are some sources of trauma for New Orleans students?
2. How does this change the way Principal Boykins deals with misbehaving students?
3. According to Paulette Carter, how might PTSD cause misbehavior?
4. How would harsh, **deterrence** punishments affect misbehaving students with PTSD?
5. How does this information relate to our work within Youth Court?