

# NATIONAL CENTER for MONTESSORI in the PUBLIC SECTOR

## Childhood Trauma

### Key Points

- Chronic traumatic situations are common and impact many of the children served in public schools.
- Toxic stress caused by trauma influences the development and function of the brain, impacting memory and emotion.
- The effects of toxic stress can manifest as behavior and learning challenges.
- To address these challenges in children exposed to chronic trauma, the underlying toxic stress must be addressed through effective nurturing.

### Case Study

Joanna is four. Today is her very first of school. Like thousands of other children across the country, today will begin in car line. Starting at about 7:45, cars begin to line up outside the school, where they will wait until a member of the school staff opens the car door, says “good morning” by name to all inside, and invites the child to help herself out of the car and into the school.

At first glance, this is merely a transactional process, meant to ensure safe and efficient transfer from car to school. Look more closely, however, and much more is going on. From a psychological/developmental point of view, the car line is a separation ritual. And, as anyone who has ever been a parent knows, separation is a necessary but not always easy process. Sometimes, separation is even traumatic.<sup>1</sup>

This was the case for Joanna and her mother. On the first day of school, car line was a snap. Joanna popped out of the car smiling, and her mother and grandmother, who were seated in the front, smiled back, told Joanna they loved her, and drove off. On day two, however, when Joanna’s teacher opened the door, Joanna’s mother was sitting in the back seat, and Joanna did not want to get out of the car. The teacher attempted to convince Joanna’s mother to allow her to assist Joanna in leaving the car, but the more the teacher encouraged separation, the more agitated both mother and daughter became.

Joanna began to cry. Her mother, then, began holding Joanna, attempting to comfort, but also making herself a barrier between Joanna and the teacher. As the situation escalated – with both mother and child speechless, tearful, and hyperventilating, the teacher called for help. The school’s head intervened by asking if it would be all right if she got in the car and with the family as they parked in the school’s lot. Then all four – child, mother, grandmother, and administrator, walked together to school office, where they sat for a few minutes to allow both Joanna and her mother to compose themselves. Once Joanna seemed calm enough, the school Head invited her to walk with her to join her friends and teacher. Joanna agreed, and the Head asked the mother and grandmother to wait while she escorted Joanna to the classroom.

Upon her return, the Head assured mother and grandmother that Joanna was now happily engaged in pouring work. Then the three proceeded to debrief what had just happened. The Head mostly listened as Marla, explained that the “grandmother” was, in fact, her own foster mother. Marla had spent most of her life in foster care and had no contact with her birth parents. Joanna’s father was only sporadically in the picture, and whenever Joanna visited him, she returned home out-of-sorts. Marla and Joanna were, once again, living with the foster mother, who, thankfully, was able to provide both stability and time to support Marla.

Car line, in other words was traumatic for Joanna because separation was traumatic for her mother. This is often the way trauma shows up in schools and families. We hear most about acute events like natural disasters, school shootings, or accidents. But chronic traumatic situations are much more common and, because they are ongoing, they have even greater impact, especially for children. Often referred to as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE),<sup>2</sup> a range of circumstances—from household dysfunction to extreme neglect and physical, emotional or sexual abuse—produce intense feelings of fear, guilt, shame, and loss of trust in others. Children who experience these types of trauma are much more likely to suffer long-term difficulties such as depression, substance abuse, and even suicide.<sup>3</sup>

### Toxic Stress: Bad News and Good News

Trauma, it turns out, does damage not just to feelings but to the very structure of the developing brain, and the cause of that damage is stress.<sup>4</sup> In the brain, that means a smaller amygdala and hippocampus, two brain structures that influence memory and emotion. When these areas are damaged, that often translates to significant learning and behavior challenges. Things like self-regulation, concentration, and general well being diminish as the brain goes into a kind of permanent “fight or flight” mode.

That’s what happened with Joanna and Marla. Separation is a trigger for Marla;<sup>5</sup> because of her own adverse experiences with household dysfunction and neglect, separating from Joanna causes distress. Her distress increased when Joanna became upset and the situation escalated to the point of both mother and daughter demonstrating full-blown stress response. This is the body’s fight or flight mechanism springing into action—the brain is flooded with cortisol, the heart races, pupils dilate—readying the body to respond to danger.

### Working the Brain Stem

When people are in the midst of a stress response, their ability to do anything other than survive is greatly diminished. That’s why reasoning with Marla did not work. Thankfully, the school’s administrator was a skillful observer of human behavior, and recognized that, at that moment, what the family needed most was to recover from the stress. And that required a combination of patient presence and the reassurance of safety.<sup>6</sup> Only after they regained some physiological equilibrium could they begin to address the emotional causes and then, finally, consider possible solutions to the problem of car line.

So, while the bad news is that toxic stress is damaging as well as generational, the good news, as this school head demonstrated, is that effective nurturing can help break that cycle and lead to better outcomes for the whole family.<sup>7</sup> Everyone experiences stressful experiences, and when those experiences are addressed sensitively, people, especially children, can recover. When those experiences are not addressed, they become toxic.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Van der Kolk, B. A. (2003). Psychological trauma. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing.

<sup>2</sup> Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., ... & Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. *American journal of preventive medicine*, 14(4), 245-258.

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- <sup>3</sup> Chapman, D. P., Whitfield, C. L., Felitti, V. J., Dube, S. R., Edwards, V. J., & Anda, R. F. (2004). Adverse childhood experiences and the risk of depressive disorders in adulthood. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 82(2), 217-225.
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- <sup>4</sup> Perry, B. D., Pollard, R.A., Blakely, T.L., Baker, W.L., & Vigilante, D. (1995). Childhood trauma, the neurobiology of adaptation and use-dependent development of the brain: How 'states' become 'traits.' *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 16(4), 271-291.
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- <sup>7</sup> Biglan, A., Flay, B.R., Embry, D. D., & Sandler, I. N. (2012). The critical role of nurturing environments for promoting human well-being. *American Psychologist*, 67(4), 257-271.
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