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Wellness for teachers facing children with ACEs

A career in teaching consists of relationships. A teacher’s work is predominantly defined by the quality of their connection with their pupils. Children who suffer from adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can be very demanding from a relationship point of view. The maintenance of the emotional and psychosocial wellness of teachers is crucial to delivering effective interventions, reducing stress, and avoiding burnout.

Children who have undergone early traumatic experiences may display distressing behaviour in the classroom. A child who has learnt not to trust adults may develop adaptive reactions that are passive, fearful, anxious, or aggressive.



When these children enter the school system, they may be considered children with ‘disturbing behaviour’. If teachers are not supported, they may find themselves in difficulty and experience stress or burnout. The presence of one or more children with adverse childhood experiences in a class can increase work demands and resources deployed by a teacher. Behavioural issues may begin when a pupil’s situation is not yet explicit. A child, for example, may display alarming attitudes or be wholly withdrawn from the class context. But issues can also come to light when the pupil’s situation is explicit. Therefore, a workload is added due to the confrontation between the school management and other professionals already involved with a child (e.g. psychologist, paediatrician, social worker, educator, etc.). In a teacher’s job, taking care of one’s emotional and relational well-being is essential. The principal professional risks for teachers, and the greatest opportunities, come from relationships with pupils. This is amplified when facing children displaying behaviours in the classroom related to their traumatic experiences. Sometimes, a teacher may feel too involved, powerless, exhausted, or responsible for what is happening. A teacher may have to face these feelings for an extended period. The experience can be tiresome and detrimental to a teacher’s psycho-physical well-being.

The needs of children who suffer ACEs may be challenging. It can be difficult for teachers to bear a child’s pain and suffering daily.

What can teachers do to care for themselves and prevent stress or burnout?

- **Being aware and knowing what ACEs are.**

Awareness of how ACEs (adverse childhood experiences) can influence the behaviour and thoughts of some children is vital.

This awareness can help to develop a greater sensitivity to the variety of needs and demands expressed by individual pupils. Being informed about the consequences of early adverse childhood experiences provides tools. These tools help frame and interpret correctly the way some children behave or react, which might otherwise be incomprehensible or misunderstood.

- **Gathering information about a specific situation that has affected a child**

Teachers must deepen their knowledge of a child by learning about that child’s past and current life history. A teacher’s curiosity can prevent stereotypical behaviour and help them to better understand the child’s needs. It is fundamental to remember that behaviour is the symptom of the problem, not the problem. Be curious about behaviour and ask, “What happened to you?” rather than “What is wrong with you?”

- **Give more attention to a child who shows problematic behaviour**

Some children’s ACEs have developed greater sensitivity than others. They require more attention, even though they often seem to claim the opposite. These children need to feel seen, heard, and accepted.

- **Talking about experiences with the headteacher, colleagues, or someone else who is trusted.**

Teachers can feel supported when they share a stressful situation with their headteacher or other trusted persons. Negative emotions reduce, and creative thinking about how to deal with the problem can begin.

- **Learning about the roles and responsibilities of different professionals involved**

Knowing the roles and aid offered by all the professionals involved within a child’s existing support and care network is helpful.

For instance, if the child has a diagnosed behavioural disorder, it is beneficial to talk to the child’s neuropsychiatrist and learn how to deal with the child’s distress signals. Or suppose the child is already in the care of the local social services. In that case, one can ask if help can be provided to support the child outside the school, such as with socialising activities or doing homework.

- **Continuous training**

Children with adverse childhood experiences need the most qualified and experienced staff. Not unqualified teachers, teaching assistants, or supply staff; that means permanent, knowledgeable professionals who understand what has happened to these children and the impact on their bodies and minds.

Through continuous formal and informal training, teachers can consolidate their professional identity, improving their teaching experiences as they can feel more self-confident even in the face of the most complex situations.

- **Supervision from senior teachers or professionals**

Supervision from senior teachers or professionals, as well as support groups for teachers, are a tool to help groups and individual teachers better manage the complex elements that characterise daily actions in educational relationships. School supervision aims to create a dialogue between the people managing any supportive intervention needs for a child. By discussing the case, new hypotheses are introduced to the individual and the collective to produce change concerning situations often characterised by criticism. ”

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TEACHERS

- **Work-life balance**

Consider your health and personal or family issues to be aware of your available resources. It’s essential to take time to learn about yourself and “check in” before you need it.

- **Take charge of your wellbeing**

Teachers are humans. They need to balance both work and their own lives whilst also fitting in rest and relaxation. Taking time to rest and reflect is integral to a helping role.

- **Learn from the past**

Think about what has helped to cope with difficult situations previously and what you can do to stay well.

- **Network**

Remember that a single person is not responsible for solving everyone’s problems; it takes a network and a community.

- **Get support when you need it**

Listen to small signals from your body and your mind. Ask for professional help (counselling, psychotherapist, physicians) before reaching or crossing the limit of your emotional and physical resources

- **Acknowledge what was possible to do to help children**

Celebrate what went well, accept what did not, and confront the limits of what could be done under the circumstances.



DON'T

- Exaggerate your skills.
- Judge the pupils for their actions or feelings.
- Take things personally; it’s not about you.
- Be ashamed to share your stressful situation.
- Be in a hurry to solve the problem.
- Be alone, create a network.



DO

- Be honest with your limitations.
- Be aware of and set aside your own biases and prejudices.
- Take care of yourself physically and mentally; the children need you at your best.
- Plan your goals and activities.
- Speak to yourself with kindness and judge yourself less when you think you have made a mistake.
- Take a break.
- When necessary, refresh your mind and get new ideas.