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Trauma-Informed Education From the Perspective of Attachment Theory

Edukacja wrażliwa na traumę z perspektywy teorii przywiązania

KEYWORDS

trauma-informed education, attachment, adverse childhood experiences, childhood trauma, emotional security

ABSTRACT

Situations that cause children's psychological trauma, such as abuse, neglect and family dysfunction, affect a significant number of children. Experiencing threat in a close relationship combined with the unavailability of a responsive adult to soothe the child's negative emotions leads to toxic stress negatively affecting brain development. Therefore, children with a history of trauma may manifest a variety of problems at school, including attention deficit, hyperactivity and emotional dysregulation. At the same time, adverse childhood experiences contribute to the development of insecure attachment styles, so that a child in a school environment may have difficulties trusting teachers, feel a lot of pressure and interpret behaviour of others as threatening. The child can also experience strong frustration in situations of failure and have difficulty resolving conflicts. Disorganised pattern of attachment has the most serious consequences.

The difficulties of students with a history of trauma require a specific response from schools, which is why there is a need for trauma-informed education. Attachment theory implies that the school should first provide a sense of emotional security for students, primarily through a relationship with the teacher who understands the student's specific needs and actively sustains an emotional exchange with the student when faced with his/her problematic reactions.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

edukacja wrażliwa
na traumę,
przywiązanie,
zagrożające
doświadczenia
w dzieciństwie,
trauma dziecięca,
bezpieczeństwo
emocjonalne

Sytuacje powodujące uraz psychiczny, takie jak przemoc, zaniedbanie i dysfunkcje rodziny dotyczą istotną część dzieci. Odczuwanie zagrożenia w bliskiej relacji połączone z niedostępnością responsywnego dorosłego łagodzącego negatywne emocje prowadzi do pojawienia się toksycznego stresu u dziecka (*toxic stress*), który negatywnie wpływa na rozwój mózgu. Stąd dzieci z historią traumy mogą w szkole przejawiać różnorodne problemy, w tym deficyt uwagi, nadaktywność i dysregulację emocji. Jednocześnie zagrożające doświadczenia w dzieciństwie (*adverse childhood experiences*) sprzyjają rozwojowi pozabezpiecznych stylów przywiązania, przez co dziecko znajdując się w środowisku szkolnym, może z trudem ufać nauczycielom, czuć dużą presję i interpretować zachowania innych w kategoriach zagrożenia, ale też przeżywać silną frustrację w sytuacji niepowodzeń i mieć trudności w rozwiązywaniu konfliktów. Najpoważniejsze konsekwencje ma zdezorganizowany wzorzec więzi.

Trudności uczniów z historią traumy wymagają specyficznej odpowiedzi ze strony szkół, stąd powstał postulat edukacji wrażliwej na traumę (*trauma-informed education*). Z teorii przywiązania wynika, że w szkole najpierw należy zapewnić dziecku poczucie bezpieczeństwa emocjonalnego, przede wszystkim dzięki relacji z nauczycielem, który w obliczu problematycznych reakcji ucznia rozumie jego specyficzną potrzebę i aktywnie podtrzymuje z nim wymianę emocjonalną.

Childhood Trauma as a Challenge for the Education System

Trauma is most often defined as a persistent reaction to a particularly difficult event or circumstance that is physically or emotionally harmful or threatens an individual's life or health, further exceeding their coping capacity (SAMHSA, 2014; Vang et al., 2023). Causes of trauma affecting children include situations such as domestic violence, sexual assault, car accidents, natural disasters, bullying and violence, illness, armed conflict, and forced migration (Buchanan et al., 2020). The demand for *trauma-informed education* has been implemented in many countries for more than two decades (Thomas et al., 2019), but it is still little present in the Polish discourse. Nowadays, a consensus has been reached on the essential directions of practice; there are numerous studies showing their effectiveness and, at the same time, there is a need to adopt a more coherent theoretical background (Avery et al., 2021).

Children are particularly at risk of experiencing harm in close relationships, as their emotional security depends precisely on significant adults (Riggs, 2011). The need to highlight such experiences has led to the development of the term *harmful*

(*adverse, threatening*) *childhood experiences* which includes violence, abuse and being raised in a dysfunctional family such as a family in which mental illness or addiction occurs (Hunt et al., 2017; Portwood et al., 2021). It is worth noting that neglecting a child's needs is recognised as a form of abuse which may have a more negative impact on development than active abuse, as, due to the parent's continued unresponsiveness, the stress response in the child persists longer (Rees, 2008).

Epidemiological studies show that it is common for children to encounter some kind of situation that can make them feel seriously threatened, including trauma. Depending on which methodology is adopted, the proportion of people reporting traumatic experiences during childhood and adolescence ranges from around 25% to 70%. For example, a large study published in *The Lancet Psychiatry* (Lewis et al., 2019) showed that 31% of surveyed 18-year-olds living in the UK remembered a traumatic situation in childhood. There is no data on the prevalence of childhood trauma in Poland; the only research available is on adults (Rzeszutek et al., 2023), according to which 60% of Polish adults had experienced some potentially traumatic event in their lifetime, with around 7% indicating that this was caused by childhood abuse. Recently, traumatising events have occurred in our region, such as the pandemic, war or the resulting refugee crisis. These pose a direct threat to students who are participants in these situations (Salmon, 2023), but it can also indirectly lead to relational trauma. This is because objective situational factors disrupting parents' life stability limit their responsiveness and sensitivity, reducing their ability to provide a sense of emotional security to their children (e.g. Fang et al., 2022). Overburdened parents are unable to relieve their child's tension, which, from the perspective of attachment theory, is the key function of a secure relationship with the parent.

Consequences of Toxic Stress on Student Functioning

Early exposure to abuse or neglect can disrupt healthy development and have life-long consequences. In this context, scholars use the term *toxic stress* (Shonkoff et al., 2012) which occurs as a result of the body's prolonged response to a difficult situation. The lack of supportive adult relationships to provide some kind of buffer between the threat and its consequences for the child plays an important role in the emergence of such stress. A persistent sense of threat has a destructive influence on the maturing brain. Therefore, traumatic experiences that occurred at a time when the brain was developing most intensely significantly increase the risk of later adaptive difficulties (Bick & Nelson, 2016). The consequences of toxic stress include cognitive, emotional and social areas as well as behaviour control. Deterioration in cognitive competence resulting in learning difficulties can be noticed at school. Weaker attention

and behaviour control results in the risk of behavioural problems. Increased rates of mental disorders, interpersonal difficulties and delinquent behaviour are noted among children raised in a threatening environment.

Trauma-Sensitive Education

Despite the effects of trauma experienced in the first half of childhood, which are difficult to reverse, there is a chance that its effects can be reduced when optimum conditions are provided in later development, mainly in the form of a supportive and safe social environment (Sroufe et al., 2006). Older children have more resilience-building resources, but emotional safety provided in meaningful relationships is still crucial to the healing process. Students who have experienced trauma in their lives may function in a specific way in the school environment and require a different way of handling it than typically developing children, hence educational institutions should be systemically prepared for this. A number of comprehensive and useful guidelines for trauma-sensitive practice are currently being developed for the education system, for example: the International Trauma-Informed Practice Principles for Schools (Martin et al., 2023), Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA, 2014), Harvard Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative (TLPI) (Cole et al., 2005), or Compassionate Schools (Hertel et al., 2009).

The most stressful situations for the child include the threat of losing a stable and supportive bond with the caregiver (Avery et al., 2021). Such stressors hinder the development of a positive attachment relationship pattern that provides a sense of security; moreover, they interfere with further psychosocial development. The following section highlights the theoretical assumptions of attachment theory that may be useful in creating trauma-sensitive education. These relate to: (1) the influence of an internal relational pattern formed in early childhood on later functioning, (2) the relationship of this pattern to the ability to regulate emotions, and (3) the possibility of modifying the pattern or activating an alternative one.

Impact of Close Relationship Patterns on School Functioning

The first of these assumptions states that the child, on the basis of early relationships, forms largely unconscious and automatic patterns for interpreting other people's behaviour and guiding his or her own behaviour. Trauma experienced during early and middle childhood can significantly affect the internal bonding pattern and

thus the ability to build relationships during the school years; it may also influence the student's trust in the teacher and his/her mental health in general (Howard, 2013). In interactions with caregivers, children should learn to perceive the social world as predictable and safe, and acquire self-confidence. When these interactions are unstable, unsupportive or even threatening, children learn that they cannot rely on others and that they themselves are not worthy of love. Feelings of insecurity are easily aroused, resulting in the children at school responding more readily with withdrawal or attack, provocation and other difficult, seemingly unwarranted behaviours (Bailey et al., 2007).

In a longitudinal study on attachment, *The Minnesota Study of Risk and Adaptation*, which tracked close relationships and the overall adaptation of children from birth to adulthood (Sroufe et al., 2006; cf. Jezierski, 2019), it has been shown that social interaction patterns acquired in early relationships play an important role in the resolution of later developmental tasks. It has been noted, among other things, that preschool children, who had a secure attachment style formed in their early relationship with their mother, were more positive towards the teacher in kindergarten, showed more independence and creativity in play, and tended to resolve conflicts constructively when interacting with peers. This general feeling of relational confidence and trust increased confidence in the acquisition of cognitive and social competences also after starting education at school.

Emotion Regulation in Traumatized Children

The second of the above-mentioned theoretical assumptions is that the main function of the attachment system is to provide emotional security (Holmes, 2014). In his/her early development, the child lacks the ability to self-regulate and it is the parent who provides reassurance in situations of distress experienced, so the child learns to do this independently. Researchers and clinicians (Fonagy et al., 2002) point out that in children who have experienced trauma in close relationships, the ability to understand internal states and their regulation is impaired.

Avoidant and resistant attachment styles are shaped by ways of parenting that do not sufficiently provide a sense of security. In difficult situations, children with avoidant attachment use strategies to deactivate the attachment system. This means that, while demonstrating a high degree of independence, they do not ask for support, they distance themselves from the emotions they are experiencing, and fail to develop trusting relationships, perceiving others as incapable of providing emotional closeness and comfort. In turn, children with resistant attachment use strategies to hyperactivate the attachment system, not feeling confident with adults trying to support

them, constantly trying to maintain the adults' closeness and attention, even at the expense of exploring the social and educational environment. These children may be shy, have low self-confidence, easily feel overstimulated, and show frustration at minor challenges.

The avoidant and resistant patterns, although not optimum for development, along with the secure style are described as organised because they provide opportunities for the child to cope with emotions, and the significant adult continues to act as a secure base that provides a framework for the emotions experienced and supports exploration. Disorganised attachment systems result from severe relational trauma and result in a lack of a clear consistent pattern of close trusting relationships. Children with disorganised attachment have difficulties in self-regulation and are inconsistent and unpredictable in relationships. Research has shown that the experience of abuse in childhood, such as physical violence, sexual abuse or neglect, can lead to a disorganised internal bonding pattern (Bailey et al., 2007). Violence also occurs in families where the child experiences positive attitudes, interest and involvement in parenting on a daily basis, and verbal aggression, threats or other forms of abuse are occasional. Howard Steele (2003) argues that, even in such cases, feeling threatened significantly hinders a child's ability to build a secure relationship pattern. In the perceptions of children who have experienced harm, the world is not a safe place and even loved ones cannot be trusted, so the children exhibit greater tension and vigilance in their interactions and may respond to even minor expressions of negative emotions from adults or other students as if they were a major threat, such as excessive anger or withdrawal. This attitude towards social contacts provided protection for these children, but it is maladaptive in everyday conditions of no threat or moderate stress (Purvis et al., 2015).

The Teacher as a Secure Base

A third important assumption of attachment theory concerns the possibility of changing the internal pattern of close relationships. Children may have multiple attachment relationships that vary in quality (Schaffer & Emmerson, 1964). Moreover, attachment patterns, although stable over the course of life, can be subject to modification under the influence of significant adults. Thus, a stable educator has the opportunity to be a model of constructive relationships despite the child's bad experiences in the family home. Karine Verschueren and Helma Koomen (2012) believe that the child's relationship with the teacher, especially in the earlier stages of education, bears some characteristics of an attachment relationship. Teachers can play the role of a secure base, and their greater or lesser sensitivity prompts students to use

different attachment strategies. When the teacher responds adequately to the child's signalled needs, the student is more likely to seek closeness to alleviate his or her negative emotions. Conversely, a less responsive teacher influences the use of secondary attachment strategies in the form of resistance and avoidance. Being able to recognise students' needs and responding to them appropriately is considered here as a fundamental factor in shaping the quality of relationships with students and supporting their confidence and autonomy in dealing with the challenges of the school period. Positive interactions with the teacher not only deescalate the excessive tensions of children who have experienced trauma, but, when such good interactions are prolonged, they can become an alternative role model to family patterns that remain unhealthy (Sroufe et al., 2006).

The child's behaviour in practice is a product of the situation and the internalised relational patterns of the child, but also of the teacher (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). The teacher, in a stressful situation, activates his or her own, largely unconscious, patterns that help him/her to cope with the situation. It can be assumed that teachers with an avoidant attachment, i. e. those who have the need to maintain emotional distance from others, are likely to show less acceptance of the attitudes of students who need too much help or supervision. Such a need is shown by children who have an avoidant attachment and who are also disorganised. It can also be assumed that teachers in this group are less likely to support children with an avoidant pattern who are reluctant to ask for help. Teachers with an overly preoccupied (ambivalent) style tend to be overly controlling and show their emotions strongly. Both avoidant and preoccupied teachers can be expected to work best with children with a secure attachment style. At the same time, a trusting teacher may recognise the avoidance of closeness in students' withdrawal and rejection behaviours, and in the oppositional behaviour of resistant and disorganised pupils such a teacher will notice the frustration of the need for adult availability.

The Place of a Safe Relationship in the Education System

In view of how common traumatic experiences are among children and how serious consequences they can have on mental health and school functioning, it is imperative to take into account the special needs of students who have survived seriously threatening situations. Since safety with significant adults is the most important protective factor against the negative effects of trauma, and, at the same time, trauma in a child most often occurs in close relationships, attachment theory seems particularly helpful for transforming the school into a system adapted to the special needs of traumatised students. This theory helps to understand the developmental consequences

of threatening situations, and also shows possibilities for increasing the sense of safety at school.

Research shows that attachment is a mediator between traumatic events and their effects in childhood, so having a secure relationship at school can become a protective factor in children who have experienced psychological trauma (Lowell et al., 2014). The availability of a safe relationship with significant adults can be considered as one of the priorities for preventive and therapeutic work in school settings. Creating optimum conditions for children affected by trauma requires teachers and educators to be able to maintain emotional connectivity and a sense of safety despite often rejecting, confrontational or ambivalent attitudes on the part of the child (Cole et al., 2005). Predictability on the part of the teacher and sensitivity to the needs of the child combined with an attitude of caring are also crucial.

The psychological burden of working with traumatised children is challenging, so adequate support for teachers is needed to prevent professional burnout. A teacher needs knowledge of trauma in order to understand the behaviour of students who have experienced it. He or she also needs to have the ability to recognise his/her own automatic reactions and relationship patterns activated in stressful situations. Professional support in the form of supervision, as well as a welcoming and supportive working environment, including the ability to share one's own difficulties, also seems essential. By making teachers and the school system able to meet the needs of students who have experienced extreme risk, both the negative impact of the developmental difficulties of these children is minimized and the mental well-being of teachers is supported. A trauma-sensitive school should equip the teacher with knowledge about trauma and relevant social competences, but also systemically support the teacher in dealing with the ongoing difficulties of the students. Above all, however, it should create a supportive and safe environment for both students and teachers in which there is room for concern for the emotions they are experiencing.

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