**MONIQUE BURR**
FOUNDATION FOR CHILDREN
**PREVENTION EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

## Child Victimization

Children in the United States suffer higher rates of victimization and crime than adults. Research shows that over 60% of recently surveyed children younger than 18 years experienced one or more victimizations in the past year, either directly or as a witness. In fact, 1 in 4 students will experience some type of trauma or victimization before they reach the age of 18. This widespread victimization is responsible for a variety of physical and mental health related consequences affecting children and teens well into their adult years.[1]

Polyvictimization refers to the experience of multiple victimizations of different kinds, such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, bullying, and exposure to family violence, not just multiple episodes of the same kind of victimization. By focusing on polyvictimization, teachers, counselors, child advocates, and other professionals who work with children and teens can provide the best interventions and prevention practices.

## Statistics

» Nearly 60% of 10-to-17-year-olds surveyed in a 2011 study said they were victims of violence, abuse, or crime in the past year. However, significantly less instances were known to authorities.[2]

» More than 58% of children in a 2009 survey said they had been victimized in the past year, including reports of bullying. Of these, almost 46% said authorities knew of at least one of the incidents. In many cases, young people and their families chose to deal with incidents "informally," fearing the consequences of police and court involvement.[3]

» The official statistics regarding abuse are conservative estimates of probably represent the lowest level of child maltreatment.[4]

» According to a 2010 national sample that examined polyvictimization of children and youth, as many as 1 in 5 American children are polyvictims: nearly 66% of the sample was exposed to more than one type of victimization; 30% experienced five or more types of victimization; a staggering 10% experienced 11 or more different forms of victimization.[5]

## The Relationship Between Victimization and Academic Achievement

Children and teens who are traumatized comprise a significant portion of our educational system. Trauma comes in many forms. According to the National Center for Child Traumatic Stress, childhood trauma may develop from exposure to natural disasters, domestic violence, automobile accidents, war trauma, terrorism, community and school violence, abuse, and bullying.[6] Some may consider the number of students who experience trauma too minimal to be concerned, however, the rates are significant.

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[1] Finkelhor, D., Turner H., Ormrod, Hamby S. Violence, Abuse, and Crime Exposure in a National Sample of Children and Youth. Pediatrics 2009;124;1411; originally published online October 5, 2009. doi: 10.1542/peds.2009-0467

[2] Finkelhor D, Ormrod R, Turner H, Hamby S. School, Police, and Medical Authority Involvement With Children Who Have Experienced Victimization. Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med. 2011;165(1):9-15. doi:10.1001/archpediatrics.2010.240

[3] Online Victimization of Youth: Five Years Later. 2006. National Center for Missing & Exploited Children, Crimes Against Children Research Center, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. December 4, 2006. http://www.unh.edu/ccrc/pdf/CV138.pdf).

[4] http://www.4vf.net/study-most-child-abuse-goes-unreported/ 5 Turner HA, Finkelhor D, Ormrod R. Poly-victimization in a national sample of children and youth. Am J Prev Med. 2010;38(3):323–30. Epub 2010/02/23. doi: 10.1016/j.\amepre.2009.11.012

[5] National Child Traumatic Stress Network Schools Committee. (October 2008). Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators. Los Angeles, CA & Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.

One out of every four students attending school has been, or will be, exposed to a traumatic event that can affect learning or school behavior. It is estimated that each year, nearly 5 million new children and teens are traumatized with potentially debilitating effects, including problems at school. "In fact, trauma may constitute the greatest cause of underachievement in schools."[7] Underachievement comes in many forms. Traumatized students may suffer from:

»   Lower grade point averages

»   Higher school absence rates

»   Increased drop-out rates

»   Increased suspensions and expulsions

»   Decreased reading ability

Why do bullied, cyberbullied, and abused children and teens have a harder time learning and achieving in school? According to research, trauma impacts neural development in the brain and therefore, emotional and behavioral consequences are usually evident and school readiness and behavior are affected.[8] Some of the indicators or consequential behaviors include:

»   Lower grade point averages

»   Hypervigilence or always being on alert. Abused and bullied children/teens may constantly be in fight or flight mode making it hard for them to relax and concentrate on schoolwork

»   Displaying aggression and social anxiety

»   Lacking behavioral self-regulation; expressing emotions and behaviors in ways that lack control

»   Displaying an inability to relate with others such as lacking trust and misreading others' intentions

»   Expecting the worst from all situations

»   Suffering from learning difficulties

There is research directly linking bullying and poor academic performance as well. The relationship between peer harassment and academic achievement has been well documented, specifically noting that students who were harassed were more likely to be disconnected and miss school, resulting in poor academic outcomes.[9] Achievement scores from 46 schools were analyzed and researchers found that after controlling for student characteristics, school safety was significantly related to math and reading standard scores among eighth graders.[10]

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[7] Ziegler, D. (2012). Optimum Learning Environment for Traumatized Children: How Abused Children Learn Best in School. Spokane, WA: Can Learn Christian Academy & WebSchoolPro.

[8] Kauffman Foundation. (2002). Set for Success: Building a Strong Foundation for School Readiness Based on the Social-Emotional Development of Young Children. Kansas, MO.

[9] Eisenberg, M.E., Neumark-Sztainer, D. and Perry, C.L. (2003). Peer harassment, school connectedness and academic achievement. Journal of School Health, 73(8), 311-316.

[10] Gronna, S.S. and Selvin, C.C. (1999). Effects of school safety and school characteristics on grade 8 achievement. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. Montreal, April 19-23.

Research suggests that high academic achievement is still possible in maltreated students despite abuse. Schools can increase academic achievement among maltreated children and teens by incorporating prevention education and helping them increase their competency with daily living skills. "Teachers are the gatekeepers to reporting abuse, getting kids the help they need, and then providing crucial support in helping those kids overcome their past."[11]

## The Need for Comprehensive Prevention

Current efforts to help victimized and traumatized children and teens are fragmented and typically focus on one type of trauma; for example, interventions and prevention programs focusing on bullying, dating violence, sexual abuse or Internet safety. Research on polyvictimization suggests that it is time for these fragmented fields, services and programs to be incorporated into an integrated, holistic approach to child victimization and prevention.

When communities experience child victimization, the usual outcome is heightened awareness, typically through the media, and sometimes through actions demanded of lawmakers, schools, and service providers. After high profile cases of bullying, cyberbullying or digital abuse, the implementation of Internet safety programs is often highlighted by the media. The same holds true for sexual abuse and exploitation. It is important to understand that these types of victimizations do not occur in isolation. Recent research supports the funding and implementation of child safety and prevention efforts that focus on the broad spectrum of victimizations that children suffer, rather than those that are isolated toward one type of victimization over another. *MBF Child Safety Matters*® and *MBF Teen Safety Matters*® are prevention education programs aligned with these implications of polyvictimization research.

## The Effectiveness of Prevention Programs

According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network fact sheet, Questions and Answers about Child Sexual Abuse, "It is critically important to educate our children."[12] There is ample research to back this sentiment. According to noted researcher David Finkelhor, Ph.D., arguments against prevention education for children are unfounded and "the weight of currently available evidence shows that it is worth providing children with high-quality prevention education programs," and that "much research has suggested that children acquire the concepts."[13]

Research has also shown that safety programs promote disclosure, and one study found lower rates of victimization for children who were exposed to these programs.[14] Finkelhor goes on to say despite arguments to the contrary, "a majority of reviews have found that children at all ages do acquire the key concepts that are being taught. In fact, younger children show more learning than older children."

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[11] Coohey C., Renner L.M., Hua L., Zhang Y.J. & Whitney S.D. (2011). Academic achievement despite child maltreatment: a longitudinal study. Child Abuse Neglect. Sep 35(9): 688-99. Epub 2011 Sep 23.

[12] National Child Traumatic Stress Network at: http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/ChildSexualAbuse_QA.pdf.

[13] Finkelhor, D. The Prevention of Childhood Sexual Abuse. The Future of Children. 2009: 19(2).:169-194.

[14] Finkelhor, D., et al. Youth exposure to violence prevention programs in a national sample. Child Abuse & Neglect (2014), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2014.01.010.

Based on an understanding of the literature available, *MBF Child Safety Matters* and/or *MBF Teen Safety Matters* should be a critical component of any school's comprehensive plan to provide a safer school environment, enhance academic performance, and prepare students from a young age to be successful in their academic endeavors.

The goal of schools is to educate students. This makes schools a natural place to implement a prevention program, especially in light of the fact that trauma directly impacts the academic achievement of children. With trauma being the greatest cause of under-achievement in schools, without intervention, students will continue to suffer from decreased reading ability and lower grade point averages, as well as increased school absences, suspensions, and drop out rates.[15]

However, not all schools and communities are currently implementing an effective, comprehensive prevention program. The consistent and widespread implementation of a primary prevention program such as *MBF Child Safety Matters* or *MBF Teen Safety Matters* supports positive social and academic outcomes for students, including less exposure to bullying and abuse, improved academic achievement, higher grade-point averages, lower drop out rates, and improved college enrollment/completion rates.

The added benefit to widespread implementation of an effective prevention program in a community is decreased spending by society on investigation, intervention, and treatment of child maltreatment. The US Centers for Disease Control estimates that the lifetime costs associated with just one year of reported child maltreatment cases are $124 billion.[16] Prevention is a much more cost-effective solution.

*MBF Child Safety Matters* and *MBF Teen Safety Matters* also educate and empower school faculty and personnel, parents and community members. This collaborative process is considered the best practice method for preventing bullying, cyberbullying, digital abuse, and maltreatment. It creates a safety net for children, a safer school environment, and opens the lines of communication between the home and school.

## Conclusion

*MBF Prevention Education Programs*, including *MBF Child Safety Matters* and *MBF Teen Safety Matters,* are comprehensive, evidence-based and evidence-informed bullying, cyberbullying, child abuse, and digital abuse prevention programs, and were developed using best practices for educating students to help the adults in their lives keep them safe. The outcomes support improved academic achievement for students, including improved grade-point averages, higher graduation rates and college enrollment/completion rates, improved social skills, and for schools and communities, better informed school staff, safer school environments, and overall decreased spending on maltreatment and trauma in children.

Learn more about the programs at www.mbfpreventioneducation.org.

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[15] *National Child Traumatic Stress Network Schools Committee. (October 2008). Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators. Los Angeles, CA & Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.*

[16] *Centers for Disease Control. (2012). Child Abuse and Neglect Cost the United States $124 billion. Retrieved August 24, from http://www.cdc.gov/media/releases/2012/p0201_child_abuse.html.*