

Trauma Education: A Reason for Hope

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Research from the CDC empirically proves that adverse childhood events (ACE) increase the likelihood of mental and physical health concerns. Many traumatic childhood events are avoidable if teachers, nurses, doctors, social workers, counsellors, lawyers, judges, and law enforcement understand the most recent domestic violence research and best practices for protecting children. Relevant domestic violence research and laws are discussed. Through changes to curriculum across disciplines, higher education could alter paradigms at the grass roots level and proactively reduce the number of traumatic events experienced by children. Suggestions are made for domestic violence topics and research to be included in courses.

Keywords: adverse childhood events, ACE Study, Saunders Study, domestic violence, domestic abuse, Violence Against Women Act, VAWA, parental alienation, child abuse, Kayden's Law, narcissism, narcissistic abuse, dark triad, personality disorders, trauma training, Safe Child Act

INTRODUCTION

Higher education is grappling with how to effectively deal with trauma experienced by members of the community. Announcements for trauma group therapy as well as training for faculty and staff are commonplace. While this is beneficial training and helps to identify and deal with trauma, it does not proactively prevent abuse. Many, if not most, students arriving on campus for the first time have never been away from home. This new freedom is accompanied by an element of risk -- the probability of encountering a charismatic, charming person, who appears to be nice, but is masking a dangerous personality disorder.

The CDC Kaiser ACE Study found that adverse childhood events (ACE) result in long-term physical and psychological consequences, affect productivity, the workplace environment, and have significant economic consequences. (CDC Kaiser ACE, 2022) Adverse events include experiencing or witnessing "coerce and control" domestic abuse that often includes physical, sexual, emotional, psychological, verbal, or financial abuse and other traumatic events. Experiencing an ACE can lead to lifelong mental and physical health concerns. Many students experience ACEs before their freshmen year. Since the early 2000's, an increasing number of freshmen begin college with a mental health disorder and statistics indicate that more than one in three freshmen arrive on campus with signs of a mental health disorder. (Searing, 2018).

How can universities protect children and victims of abuse and perhaps reduce the number of ACEs students experience? Colleges and universities educate future doctors, nurses, teachers, social workers, counsellors, psychologists, caregivers, lawyers, politicians, judges, and others involved with law enforcement. It is critical for these professionals to identify, and understand adverse childhood events and when possible, to seek to reduce, eliminate, and effectively deal with these tragic events by decreasing childhood exposure.

Individuals with a dangerous personality disorder often hide behind a mask of charisma and charm. The human debris field left in their wake is widespread. The importance of understanding narcissistic personality disorder and the “dark triad” have far-reaching effects on trauma and inter-personal violence (IPV) and are important items to teach students in every discipline. The rise of narcissism has been described as an epidemic and “Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), the more severe, clinically diagnosed version of the trait, is also far more common than once thought.” (Twenge and Campbell, 2009) Narcissism and inter-personal violence and domestic abuse frequently go hand in hand. The narcissist seeks control and is empowered by chaos and conflict; a confident liar who lacks empathy and seeks to dominate/bully others, the narcissist is often placed in positions of authority over others. It is particularly important for those who encounter children to understand that ACEs are often associated with dangerous personalities.

BACKGROUND

Faculty, administrators, and staff who have been active in the academe over the past two decades have observed first-hand, a significant increase in the number of students with anxiety, depression, and trauma-related disorders. These anecdotal observations have now been corroborated by peer-reviewed research. The findings from a comprehensive study using two large national datasets from 2008-2018, “demonstrate a broad worsening of mental health among U.S. college students over the past decade, a concerning result meriting further attention and intervention.” (Duffy, et.al., 2019, p.560) Specifically, this study found that “rates of depression, anxiety, non-suicidal self-injury, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts markedly increased over the assessed years, with rates doubling over the period in many cases. Anger, low flourishing, and suicide plans, each assessed in only one dataset, also exhibited upward trends.” (Duffy, et.al., 2019, p. 560) It is time for higher education to take an active role in trauma awareness and prevention; research published by the American Psychological Association indicates that greater than 1 in 3 college freshmen show symptoms of mental health related disorders. (Searing, 2018)

Many of these students were harmed by a broken family court system and child protective agencies that promote ‘parental rights’ over the right of a child to be safe from abuse. While colleges and universities cannot immediately ‘fix’ the court system and provide services to children before they arrive on campus, schools can modify course content and change the curriculum for psychology, social work, teacher preparation, nursing, pre-med. pre-law, criminal justice, business management, criminal justice, and political science to address this problem.

FAILING TO PROTECT CHILDREN

Domestic abuse is not an offense that is perpetrated in public. It occurs behind closed doors without witnesses; with victims intentionally isolated from family and friends. It includes verbal, emotional, psychological, financial, sexual and even physical abuse. Survivors of domestic abuse understand at a very personal level that this is a way of life for the abuser and that children are likely targets of this abusive behaviour. In the family court system, if a protective mother is framed by the abuser as being an ‘alienator’, then ‘the safe parent’ frequently loses custody; the result is that approximately 58,000 children a year are placed in dangerous homes in the U.S. (Meier and Dickson, 2017). Out of ignorance, experts around the world apply ‘parental alienation’ and mothers frequently lose custody of their children to the abusive parent. (Alsalem, 2023)

It should not be difficult to protect a child from abuse. After all, our society has systems in place to protect our children. Unless you or someone that you know have first-hand knowledge of one of these tragic cases, it is hard to believe that custody is being granted to abusers while victims of domestic abuse and their children are being punished and scarred for life. “Most people, including court professionals, are unaware that custody courts are having severe problems trying to respond to cases involving domestic violence or child abuse.” (Goldstein and York, 2022)

Since the 1990's, family courts across the country have shown a distinct preference for joint custody and assume that children naturally fare better with two parents intimately involved in their lives, even in the most contentious divorce and custody cases. This has been shown to be a false assumption when one parent is abusive, as the pattern of abuse will more than likely be replicated with the child. The Center for Judicial Excellence has been keeping track of tragic outcomes. Since 2008, 864 children have been murdered by a divorcing/separating parent and in 117 of these horrific events, the death of these children could have been prevented if the family court had listened to the warnings of the 'protective parent'. (Center for Judicial Excellence, 2022)

For years, there was anecdotal evidence from protective parents reporting that the family courts had punished them for bringing abuse to their attention and/or for trying to protect their children from abuse. "Protective parents and domestic violence professionals have long asserted that courts dealing with child custody and their affiliated professionals frequently deny true claims of adult partner or child abuse and instead punish parents (usually mothers) who allege domestic violence, child physical or sexual abuse, or seek to limit the other parent's child access for any reason." (Meier, 2020, p. 92) The Family Court Outcomes Study is the first empirical study of ten years of U.S. cases involving allegations of abuse and claims of "parental alienation" and the mistreatment of these allegations in family court. (Meier, 2020)

CONGRESSIONAL RESPONSE

Although the prevention of domestic violence and the protection of children from abuse has received national attention, states have been slower to act. On March 11, 2022, President Biden signed into law the reauthorization of the federal Violence Against Women Act (VAWA). A provision of VAWA is Kayden's Law, a law that was named after a child killed by an abusive father exercising parental rights granted by a Pennsylvania family court judge. Kayden's Law provides funding to states with the following custody laws and standards:

- Expert testimony is limited to those with demonstrated expertise and clinical experience working with victims of domestic violence.
- Past child abuse or domestic violence must be considered in custody disputes.
- Contact with the safe parent must not be restricted to improve a bad relationship with the abuser.
- Reunification treatment will not be ordered unless it is scientifically valid.
- All court personnel must complete 20 hours of initial training and 15 hours of additional training every five years.

The VAWA provides financial incentives for states to adopt the standards found in Kayden's Law, as well as common sense solutions to a problem with potentially tragic outcomes. The above recommendations should be enforced in the family courts and professionals entrusted with the welfare of children need to receive appropriate training. Is Kayden's Law the law of the land? Not yet. However, hints of a tidal shift appeared in May 2023 at the state level beginning in Colorado. "The new law makes Colorado the first state to pass a law based on the federal Keeping Children Safe from Family Violence Act, also known as Kayden's Law." (Dreyfus, 2023) In August 2023, Governor Gavin Newsom signed California's version of Kayden's Law known as Piqui's Law -- named after a California child murdered by his abusive father. It is time for all states to recognize the primacy of child safety and adopt Kayden's Law.

It is also important for every state to pass a Safe Child Act (Goldstein, 2022) requiring family courts to have an early evidentiary hearing when there are signs of domestic violence or child abuse; and that the abuser have supervised visitation if evidence of abuse is found to be present. It is critical for the health and safety of the child to be the top priority in determining custody.

INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE

There is an international pattern of ignoring intimate partner violence in custody cases and this has led to tragic outcomes. (Alsalem, 2023) Failing to protect women and children from domestic violence and abuse was addressed by The Human Rights Council of the UN General Assembly in 2023 and has gained recognition as a global concern. Reem Alsalem, the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and violence against children, issued a report linking custody cases involving coercive control and domestic abuse with violence against both women and children. This report has a special focus on the misuse of the term ‘parental alienation’ and similar pseudo-concepts that have been rejected by the World Health Organization. (Alsalem, 2023) Although rejected by the American Psychological Association, the CDC, and the AMA, courts in the U.S. continue to rely on ‘parental alienation.’

CONCLUSION

Everyone, at some point, will come in close contact with a person who has a dangerous personality disorder. Viewed by many as incurable, and adept at hiding behind a mask of charm and charisma, it is important to enable people to identify dangerous personalities and the consequences of their abusive behaviour. Those entrusted with the safety and well-being of children need to have an in-depth understanding of personality disorders, including but not limited to narcissism and the “dark triad.” The ACE Study revealed the enormous price paid by the victim and by extension, the community, when there is an adverse childhood event. Without knowledge of ACE, custody evaluators, social workers, and family courts, minimize domestic abuse and the effects on a child. The Saunders Study tells us that reports of abused children and the survivors of domestic abuse should be believed and not ignored; this study is equally important because without it, courts rely on the wrong experts and make life altering decisions that harm children. The research of Professor Joan Meier demonstrates that in custody disputes where there is domestic violence and a protective parent, that in a majority of cases, the abuser is granted sole or joint custody; thus, placing the child’s safety and well-being in jeopardy.

Without a doubt, reducing domestic abuse and trauma could benefit students, college campuses, families, and the community at large. The abuse or death of children recklessly entrusted to abusers so they can exercise their parental rights, has garnered the attention of lawmakers at the national level. Kayden’s Law protects children from abusers and is now part of the federal Violence Against Women Act; however, to be applicable in family courts, it needs to be adopted at the state level -- it is here, that there is considerable work to be done.

It will be up to future leaders to understand and attempt to eliminate the causes of adverse childhood events and to recognize the importance of protecting children from trauma by adopting Kayden’s Law and the Safe Child Act. Colleges and universities educate future leaders and professionals who are charged with the safety and well-being of children. Higher education could proactively protect students, children, and members of the community from trauma by increasing awareness of the latest research through multi-disciplinary changes to curriculum for political science, pre-law, pre-med, business, sociology, psychology, criminal justice, education, business, and nursing students. Through multi-disciplinary changes in the curriculum outlined in *Table 1* below, universities have the unique opportunity to positively impact the mental and physical well-being of future students and by extension, the community at large.

TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF SUGGESTED ADDITIONS TO COURSE CONTENT

<i>CDC Kaiser ACE Study</i>	The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente studied adverse childhood events from 1995-1997. Over 17,000 patients receiving physical exams from their HMO providers answered anonymous surveys in two waves of data collection in this seminal study. By definition, an adverse childhood event takes place before a person’s 18 th birthday and includes emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, mother treated violently, substance abuse in the household, mental illness in the household, parental separation or divorce, incarcerated household member, emotional or physical neglect. (CDC Kaiser ACE, 2022) This peer-reviewed medical research concluded that children exposed to domestic violence, child abuse, and other traumas will suffer adverse mental and physical health consequences and a lifetime of health problems including premature death and heart disease. “Most of the harm is not from any immediate physical injuries, but from living with the fear and stress abusers cause.” (Goldstein, 2022)
<i>Saunders Study</i>	The Saunders Study, a peer reviewed research sponsored by the Department of Justice found that mothers alleging abuse only made false reports 1.3% of the time and that fathers are sixteen times more likely than mothers to fabricate allegations of child abuse. This report also concluded that court professionals need knowledge of specific subjects to adequately screen for domestic violence and to understand the impact of domestic violence on children. Unfortunately, very few court professionals have ever heard of this study. “Professionals without this knowledge tend to focus on the myth that mothers frequently make false reports and unscientific alienation theories.” (Goldstein, 2022)
<i>Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD)/ Dark Triad</i>	An Internet search using the terms “divorce,” “custody” and “malignant narcissist” reveals a plethora of articles and web sites chronicling remarkably similar and horrific experiences. NPD is characterized by a lack of empathy, lying, gaslighting, an inability to love another person, amoral and risky behaviour, treating a partner/spouse and children as possessions, blame shifting, revenge for perceived wrongs and slights, and dichotomous thinking – you are either with or the enemy. Life is a game that must be won or lost and the best interests of those in the narcissist’s path are ignored. Worst of all, narcissists don’t believe that anything is wrong with them; thus, successfully treating NPD is almost impossible.
<i>Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS)</i>	This theory is used to convince the courts that the “safe parent” is seeking to limit access to the child to alienate the child from the abuser. PAS was concocted by Richard Gardiner, a disgraced psychologist whose work was based on personal observations and never peer-reviewed. Gardner’s published work includes many “paedophile friendly” quotes. Based on personal observations and never peer-reviewed, PAS has been rejected by the American Psychological Association, the American Medical Association, and the World Health Organization. It has been repackaged as “parental alienation” and used by abusers, their lawyers, and family court judges to limit the protective parent’s access to their child.
<i>The Family Court Outcomes Study (Meier, 2020)</i>	This study examined the family courts’ reaction to abuse and claims of “alienation” and found that women who allege abuse are losing custody of children they are trying to protect. Family courts unfamiliar with “The Saunders Study” are lending credence to spurious allegations of “alienation;” children are being harmed and protective mothers are being punished. “The data support the widespread critiques of family court proceedings sending children into the care of destructive and dangerous parents. The gender disparity in how much more powerfully alienation claims work for fathers as opposed to mothers also reinforces claims that, <i>in abuse cases</i> , alienation is little different from PAS, operating in an illegitimate, gender-biased manner.” (Meier, p. 102, 2020)

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