

## **A Quest for Safety: Helping Delaware Students Find Peace**

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Students that live in homes, go to school in, and live in communities that are violent have a very difficult time focusing on their studies. Exposure to violence in almost every venue they exist in, these students need a safe place that will allow them to let their guard down long enough to let the good things in life in. The School-Based Health Centers aim to be the venue where Delaware students feel at peace; we hope to be the destination of choice for students on a quest for safety in an otherwise hostile environment.

The school-Based Health Centers in 29 high schools across the state of Delaware see many students with a wide variety of symptoms related to adverse childhood experiences or traumatic stress. Some of these experiences include physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, witnessing domestic violence, loss of a parent due to substance abuse, imprisonment or death, and community violence. Since many of these experiences occur in the home or community where they live, students often struggle to identify a place where they feel safe. They often struggle with symptoms of anxiety, depression and an inability to manage anger. When children are chronically exposed to traumatic stress they are in a constant state of fight or flight. They are often unable to distinguish a real threat from a perceived threat.

The fight, flight or freeze response is a physiological response to keep an individual safe when presented with a threat to emotional or physical safety. In many ways, such a response is a survival tool in neighborhoods plagued with violence or maltreatment at the hands of caregivers. However, it does not translate well in the school setting. This quest for safety presents as defiance, aggression, disrespect and apathy resulting in frequent peer conflict, noncompliance with school rules and expectations ultimately leading to out of school suspensions. Thus, the students are remanded back to the place they often feel most unsafe; home.

With the increased violence and trauma Delaware students have been exposed to this past year in their homes, neighborhoods, and in schools, treating students who live in violent neighborhoods have been an ongoing challenge and focus of the school-Based Health centers. It is a fundamental expectation that students should be able to come to school and feel safe, but when students' homes, neighborhoods, and schools are unsafe, it makes it difficult for students to focus on their education. According to the Child & Adolescent Measurement Initiative:

[When we look specifically at] Delaware's children (age 0-17) who have been a victim/witness of neighborhood violence, 11.6% has been affected- compared to the national average of 8.6%.  
[Also, when we look at] Delaware's children who have witnessed domestic violence in the home, 8.0% have been affected [as] compared to the national average of 7.3%.<sup>1</sup>

There is a huge need to identify our students affected by violence and to help them feel understood and provide them with a safe haven.

Screening for traumatic experiences provided vital insight into a student's function. Students are often unable to make the connection between their behaviors or emotional reactions and their previous experiences. Students often identify feeling angry or on edge and not knowing why. The use of the screen tool allows providers to help students put pieces of the puzzle together.

Providing psychoeducation on the impact of traumatic experiences allows students to make sense of their reactions.

Providers can then help students identify triggers and how they are connected to traumatic experiences thus placing the trauma in the proper context of time so the student isn't reacting to the traumatic event, but the current experience. Teaching grounding techniques and mindfulness are also critical in helping students stay present.

The goal is not to disarm the fight or flight response but help restore it to a normal level of functioning. Providing students with alternative responses allows them to become open to social-emotional learning.

Students who receive services in the School-Based Health center are screened with a validated screening tool called the Rapid Assessment for Adolescent Preventive Services (RAAPS). Responses from students who were screened by 15 school-Based Health centers this past year showed that:

- 24.0% said they often felt sad or down as though they had nothing to look forward to in the previous month.
- 19.2% admitted they do things that get them in trouble when they are angry.
- 13.1% said they had serious problems or worries at home or at school.
- 10.0% admitted to having been threatened, teased, or hurt by someone (on the internet, by text, or in person) or to have been made to feel sad, unsafe or afraid by someone.<sup>2</sup>

As we continue to explore how to better identify students affected by violence and trauma to connect them with the appropriate resources in the community - as well as enhance the programming we provide in our sites - one thing is clear; we must help Delaware students to feel safe and experience peace in their lives if they are going to grow into the well-adjusted adults who contribute to society that we all know that they can become.

## References

1. Child & Adolescent Measurement Initiative. (2014). Adverse childhood experiences among Wilmington City and Delaware's children, data resource center, supported by cooperative Agreement 1-u59-Mc0680-01 from the US Department of Health & Human Services. Health Resources & Services Administration, Maternal & Child Health Bureau. Retrieved from: [www.childhealthdata.com](http://www.childhealthdata.com)
2. Rapid Assessment for Adolescent Preventive Services. Retrieved from: <https://www.raaps.org>

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