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Effects of Trauma Induced Stress on Attention, Executive Functioning, Processing Speed, and Resilience in Urban Children

Antoinette Welsh

Date of Award
Winter 2013

Degree Type
Dissertation

Degree Name
PhD Counseling Psychology

Department
Professional Psychology and Family Therapy

First Advisor
Laura K. Palmer, Ph.D.

Second Advisor
Cheryl Thompson-Sant, Ph.D.

Third Advisor
John E. Smith, Ed.D.

Abstract
Brain development, and particularly structures involved in executive functioning, occur at different rates in children, leading to differential performance in school. Due to neuroanatomical changes secondary to the stress response, children who have experienced stress as a result of poverty and traumatic events may be at increased risk for cognitive difficulties, including attention, executive functioning, and processing speed (Blair, Granger, & Razza, 2005; DeBella, Hooper, & Sapia, 2005). Prevalence rates among urban children suggest that 70–100% have been exposed to trauma (Dempsey, Overstreet, & Moely, 2000; Macy, Barry, & Naan, 2003). Some of these children develop posttraumatic stress disorder and some do not, raising the question of resilience (Bonanno & Manoni, 2003). Difficulties with cognitive functioning, as well as the role of protective factors have major implications for school performance (Gathercole, Pickering, Knight, & Stegmann, 2004). The current study examined sustained attention, imitation, working memory, and processing speed and the influence of resilience in 47 underprivileged urban elementary school children, ages 8 through 13, who have experienced stress as a result of poverty and trauma. Data were collected through neuropsychological assessments and participant self-report measures. Results suggested that stronger resilience was associated with fewer difficulties with sustained attention and working memory. These findings have significant implications for resilience training and increased academic supports in the classroom. Suggestions and literature on such programs are provided.

Recommended Citation
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