

# Defending Childhood:

## Preventing, Reducing and Mitigating Distress, Anxiety and Trauma

Karen Williams, August, 2014

Distress, anxiety and trauma are now the norm for millions of children. A 2008 study showed that over 60% of U.S. children under the age of 17 experience child maltreatment, psychological trauma, or family and community violence each year. This study has been a wakeup call for parents, community leaders and schools across the nation, transforming the way adults view and respond to children's behaviors, and driving dramatic positive changes that are reducing mental, emotional and behavioral health problems.

### To reduce disengagement, disconnection, dropping out, delinquency, and drug use we must...

1. Learn what neuroscience teaches us about **distress, anxiety and trauma. Distress, anxiety and trauma are the common denominators for children's major risks.**  
<http://trans4mcenter.org/>
2. Learn about the U. S. Attorney General's **"Defending Childhood Initiative"**.  
<https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/238485.pdf>
3. Be aware of the National Research Council's "Preventing Mental, Emotional and Behavioral Health Disorders Among Young People: Progress and Possibilities"
  - 50% of mental, emotional and behavioral health disorders BEGIN BEFORE AGE 14.
  - **Many emotional health disorders and almost all behavioral health disorders ARE PREVENTABLE.**
  - **Children show symptoms 2-4 YEARS PRIOR to REACHING the CRITERIA for a PREVENTABLE DISORDER.**
  - These symptoms are ignored or identified as "misbehaviors" and punished, which accounts for the delay in children getting help. **Behavior is the leading indicator of a child's state of emotional health.**
  - 3.5 million children are suspended each year for showing signs and symptoms of distress, anxiety and trauma.
  - **It takes at least 25 years to build a BASIC BRAIN. 75% of preventable emotional and behavioral health disorders BEGIN BEFORE AGE 25. ALL INTERVENTIONS MUST TAKE THIS into ACCOUNT.**  
<http://www.iom.edu/Reports/2009/Preventing-Mental-Emotional-and-Behavioral-Disorders-Among-Young-People-Progress-and-Possibilities.aspx>
4. **Increase the number of "Trauma-informed Schools"** – a national movement to use a public health approach to prevent, reduce and/or mitigate the effects of distress, anxiety and trauma FOR EVERY CHILD.
  - The same practices that reduce distress, anxiety and trauma increase explicit learning and self-regulated behavior. Behavior improves, teachers can teach, children can learn, grades to up, graduation is the norm - - everyone wins.
  - These schools recognize "fight, flight and freeze" behaviors as cries for help - not misbehavior - and intervene early.
  - These schools teach every child stress management and coping skills.
  - These schools have restored the "Civic Mission of Schools" (character education).
  - These schools focus on building "**felt safety**", **connection, empowerment, and support, i.e., the basis of homeostasis so that explicit learning, self-regulatory behavior and positive development are possible FOR ALL CHILDREN.**
  - **All staff are trained as "Emotional Management Trainers" (EMTs); their first job is to restore homeostasis.**
5. Know, adopt, practice and teach all children coping and stress management skills, i.e., the "Super Six": Mindfulness, Breathing, Growth Mindset, Gratitude, Affirmations, and Asking, Accepting and Giving Help.

# Neuroscience Has Shown that Distress, Anxiety and Trauma Are the Common Denominators for Children's Risks



**We have two ways of learning and developing:** 1) implicit, subconscious, "survival" learning (the role of our mirror neurons), which takes place automatically and never shuts down, and 2) "explicit, conscious, self-regulatory" learning (the role of the neurons in our pre-frontal cortex, et. al.)



**Explicit learning only takes place when our brain is at peace , i.e., in a state of HOMEOSTASIS** - which is a state of restful alertness ("rest and digest") i.e., a state of biochemical balance.



**HOWEVER WHEN OUR BRAIN SENSES an UNMET NEED or OTHER THREAT -** regardless of whether it is real or imagined, external or within the body -

it immediately responds with an "auto-alert" that releases a cascade of chemicals to

**switch energy away from explicit learning to a state of alarm called our "SURVIVAL MODE".**

Our Survival Mode produces distress, which is **designed to last only a very short time.** If it lasts, or exceeds one's coping capacities, **it can escalate to anxiety, and in the extreme, a state of trauma.**



In order to notify the outside world that distress, anxiety and trauma are present, our Survival System triggers "survival reflex behaviors" known as "fight, flight and freeze".

**FIGHT, FLIGHT and FREEZE ARE PROTECTIVE BEHAVIORS; THEY ARE "CRIES for HELP".**



**If not interrupted,** distress, anxiety and trauma can

**DISRUPT EXPLICIT LEARNING and SELF-REGULATED (REASONED) BEHAVIOR and DEVELOPMENT.**

**If not interrupted,** distress, anxiety and trauma can escalate, reaching the criteria for **ANXIETY DISORDER, DEPRESSION, and POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER.**

**If not interrupted** survival reflex behaviors , i.e., fight, and flight, freeze behaviors, can escalate and **reach the criteria for "OPPOSITIONAL DEFIANT" and "CONDUCT" DISORDERS.**

When youth lack stress-management and coping skills, they try any short-term "fix" for comfort.

**If not interrupted,** these "fixes" can reach the criteria for a variety of **PREVENTABLE EMOTIONAL and BEHAVIORAL HEALTH DISORDERS.**



## RISKS to CHILDREN'S HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELL-BEING

➤ **Disrupted Learning and Development**

➤ **Self-Defeating, Harmful & Dangerous Behaviors**

*(Substance Abuse, Truancy, School Failure, Dropping Out, Bullying, Delinquency, Gang Involvement, Violence & Crime)*

➤ **Preventable Emotional & Behavioral Health Disorders**



Changing the Target



**DISTRESS  
ANXIETY and TRAUMA  
Common  
Denominators  
For Risks**



**Changes  
Everything**

