The Impact of Complex Trauma on Motivation in Children

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Question and Hypothesis

**Assertion**
The experience of complex trauma leads to extrinsic motivation in children.

**Questions**
1. What is trauma?
2. What is complex trauma?
3. How does complex trauma affect motivation?
4. How does complex trauma lead to extrinsic motivation?

Abstract

- Addresses the effects of complex trauma on a child’s motivation.
- Ryan and Deci’s (2000) self-determination theory is utilized to understand how complex trauma affects intrinsic motivation in children.
- The theoretical framework is applied to an example for further conceptualization.
- A best practice approach for school psychologist utilizing the Response to Intervention (RTI) model is offered for treatment and consultation.
- Recommendation and future directions for research are provided.

Literature Review

- Approximately five million children experience a traumatic event each year in the United States (Perry, 2003).
- One in four children are affected by some form of trauma before reaching the age of 18 (Perry, 2003).
- The experience of complex trauma leads to impairments in attachment, biology, affect regulation, dissociation, behavioral control, cognition, and self-concept (Cook et al., 2003).

Definition of Terms

- **Trauma**: a psychologically distressing event that is outside the range of usual human experience.
- **Complex trauma**: the experience or exposure to severe stressors that began in childhood or adolescence and continues over time.
- **Competence**: the ability to achieve desired goals.
- **Relatedness**: the development of a secure and satisfying connection with others.
- **Autonomy**: the ability to complete actions independently, through the internalization of values.

Theoretical Foundation


Motivation is an essential element of biological, cognitive, and social regulation. Ryan and Deci’s self-determination theory is an approach to understand human motivation and personality. The theory considers an individual’s inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs as the foundation of motivation and personality integration. There are three psychological needs that foster self-motivation: competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Individuals are motivated for various reasons; these reasons can be either through intrinsic motivation or extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is when a child is regulated internally and engages in a task because he or she values the activity, is urged into action because of interest, or the task may contain a personal commitment to excel in accomplishing a goal. Extrinsic motivation is less internalized, therefore, it is externally regulated. When an individual’s psychological needs are not met he or she may exhibit extrinsic motivation, or amotivation, which is the furthest away from a self-determined motivation.

Proposed Theoretical Model

The experience of complex trauma affects a child’s ability to fulfill his or her innate psychological needs. Children exposed to complex trauma will often result in dissociation as a protective factor to cope with the occurrence and feelings of the traumatic event within one’s environment. The utilization of dissociation negatively disrupts and affects an individual’s behavior, cognition, and ability to connect with others. This in turn, impacts the child’s ability to develop intrinsic motivation, as his or her psychological needs are not met.

In contrast, if the child is provided with an opportunity to develop effective coping strategies and fulfill his or her psychological needs, he or she will develop intrinsic motivation.

Application of Theoretical Model

A child who has experienced complex trauma and who was reared in an unsupportive environment exhibits a diminished ability to develop intrinsic motivation. In school, this can be portrayed through inappropriate social behavior, agitation, hypervigilance, and struggles in self-regulation. The experience of complex trauma leads the child to express feelings of guilt, shame, self-blame, and helplessness, all of which negatively impacts a child’s psychological needs. These feelings are continuously reinforced in school as the child is not provided with a supportive environment to fulfill his or her psychological needs for intrinsic motivation. The child will then be amotivated.

Conclusion and Recommendation

**Conclusion**

Children who experienced complex trauma should be provided with a supportive environment for the development of intrinsic motivation.

**Recommendations**

Cultural considerations must be taken into account when selecting assessments and interventions.

References


Best Practices

**Response to Intervention (RTI)**

- **Assessment**
  - Tier 3: Children’s Academic Intrinsic Motivation Inventory; Child PTSD Symptoms Scale
  - Tier 2: Intrinsic Motivation Inventory; Traumatic Events Screening Inventory for Children
  - Tier 1: Draw-A-Person Test; Trauma Symptom Checklist for Children

- **Interventions**
  - Tier 3: Individual therapy; Personal best goal
  - Tier 2: Group counseling; Lunch Bunch
  - Tier 1: Project Based Learning

- **Consultation**
  - Tier 3: Referral for family therapy
  - Tier 2: Student Success Team (SST) meeting
  - Tier 1: Insurance training for teachers; Back to School Night

**Tier 3**

- Referral for family therapy

**Tier 2**

- Student Success Team (SST) meeting

**Tier 1**

- Project Based Learning

**Recommendations**

- Inservice

**Implementation**

- Response to Intervention (RTI)