

'In the trenches': Team led by Duquesne U. helps after-school programs tackle childhood trauma

Every weekday, kids stream into Kingdom Life Fellowship Pittsburgh for an after-school program, getting homework help and lessons, eating dinner and playing games for three hours before heading home.

The mood is sometimes rambunctious, the halls of the church filled with shouts and laughter, but there's pain there, too — many of the kids live in tough environments, have experienced violence or lost someone they love. Two years ago, one of the girls in the program, 6-year-old Isis Allen, [was killed by a stray bullet](#), four blocks from the church in Knoxville.

“The problems that these kids face aren't satisfied in a time out,” the Rev. Frederick White said. “They don't have the coping skills to press through those times. So they'll break down or they'll act out. And we go through that cycle all day with 20 different kids.”

Now, Rev. White said, he and his staff hope to start understanding what is going on under the surface when a child misbehaves or has trouble concentrating. He and several other staffers last month took part in a pilot training session on childhood trauma, training developed by a team of students and community members led by Duquesne University professors.

The goal is to help childcare providers recognize and understand trauma, and to give adults new skills to help children cope and heal, said Lillian Grate, a licensed professional counselor with the nonprofit Neighborhood Allies who helped develop the training.

“It’s a road map,” she said. “It really walks through the process of healing, starting with how to stay safe, how to heal and how to reintegrate into self and into the community.”

Kids dealing with trauma — which can be a single event or an ongoing set of circumstances — may have physical symptoms like headaches, said Eva Simms, a professor of psychology at Duquesne. They might be numb or emotionless, or might express emotions that are inappropriate for the situation.

“Your brain loves you so much that it will use whatever it needs to to protect you against that [traumatic] situation or anything like it,” Ms. Grate said. “Whatever your brain perceives as being protective, that is what is going to happen.”

Between 2006 and 2016, 382 children and teenagers age 18 and younger were shot in Pittsburgh, [creating long-lasting scars for some survivors](#). But trauma isn’t limited to violence — it can range from something as simple as a family move to something as complex as chronic racism.

“It’s extreme stressors that overwhelm the individual’s ability to cope,” Ms. Grate said.

Rev. White’s staff was the first group to undergo the eight-hour training, which is funded by a \$4,900 micro-grant from the Allegheny County Health Department’s Office of Violence Prevention. The health department received [\\$500,000 from the Heinz Endowments](#) in 2016 to try to reduce gun violence by treating it as a disease.

The money was used to create [trauma response teams](#) — volunteers who go to the scenes of shootings and offer mental health care — and to hire street outreach workers, locals who attempt to mediate community disputes before they escalate to violence. About \$48,000 was set aside for micro-grants to fund smaller projects.

The training team will hold two more pilot sessions with other organizations as they refine the training, said Ms. Simms. After that, as the grant money runs out, they'll evaluate the best options to keep the training available.

“After-school programs in low-income neighborhoods deal with children on a daily basis who have seen a lot,” Ms. Simms said. “And there is so little support for these staff in terms of financial and emotional support, good training and tools. They're in the trenches.”

The training is designed not only to equip childcare providers to help kids, but also to help those adults deal with the trauma they've faced in their own lives, said Robert Ware, who is involved in the training through his business, WareHouse Consulting.

“The communities themselves are experiencing complex trauma,” he said. “That comes up in nuanced and sometimes explosive ways in an after-school program between staff, who themselves have experienced complex, ongoing trauma in the neighborhood, and kids, who are coming of the bus and themselves are either withdrawing or having explosive behaviors. It's a very, very complex interaction.”

Rev. White said the training gave him and his staff a chance to address their own pasts. The session prompted him to expand his definition of trauma by recognizing the effects of poverty and racism.

“We get so used to going through things in life, dealing with an issue, finding a way to move on, and dealing with the next thing,” he said. “You endure, and you move on to the next day. It's just kind of the nature of life, in the African-American community, anyway...I don't think there is a lot of recognition of that reality for people. For me, that was that lightbulb moment of, ‘Oh wow, that's what trauma is.’ ”

Now, he wants to help the kids in his program avoid that same cycle. In the roughly three weeks since they completed the training, they've already

successfully used some of the strategies, he added.

“So, say a kid acts out,” Rev. White said. “We could put them in time out, let that time expire, bring them back into the group and move on. But one of the things the training helped us to do is to explore, so, ‘Why did this happen? How are you feeling? What caused you to act like that? What could we do different?’ And I think over time, that will also help the kids evaluate themselves.”

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