



Paper Tigers James Redford, Director

Branford, CT. KPJR Films (2015). 102 minutes, \$17.99

Reviewed by Kim Brown, University of North Carolina Asheville

Abstract

Those concerned with the wellbeing of youth have been studying factors which impact the mental health of young people for quite some time. In 1995, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente Health Care Providers began studying the impact on this population where Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are concerned. A particular focus has recently been placed on the mental state of youth given the impact of COVID-19. The intersection of the events experienced by youth due to the pandemic and existing mental health challenges has resulted in an emergency situation in the United States. This crisis is recognized widely and has caused organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children's Hospital Association to call for action. Educators play a pivotal role in shaping the lives of youth and impacting their mental health. Hence, their ability to employ trauma informed practices in schools has the potential to positively impact youth and their existing mental health challenges. Techniques portrayed in the documentary film, Paper Tigers, should be studied by all who are interested in gaining knowledge about working to end the youth mental health crisis in America.

Keywords: *Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), Youth Mental Health, Youth, Trauma in formed Educational Practices, Effective School Environment*

On October 19, 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children's Hospital Association issued a joint National State of Emergency in Children's Mental Health.¹ The purpose of this act was to encourage policymakers and those who advocate for children and adolescents to work with these organizations to promote and fund a series of actions centered on tackling the youth mental health crisis in the United States. Just weeks later, on December 7, 2021, the U.S. Surgeon General announced a Surgeon

1. American Academy of Pediatrics, "AAP-AACAP-CHA Declaration of a National Emergency in Child and Adolescent Mental Health," American Academy of Pediatrics, October 19, 2021, <https://www.aap.org/en/advocacy/child-and-adolescent-healthy-metal-development/aap-aacap-cha-declaration-of-a-national-emergency-in-child-and-adolescentmental-health/>.

General's Advisory entitled, *Protecting Youth Mental Health*.² The Advisory delineates numerous proposals aimed at improving the mental health of youth in the United States. Both of these declarations are based on the following statistics regarding the mental health status of America's children and adolescents:

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health challenges were the leading cause of disability and poor life outcomes in young people, with up to 1 in 5 children ages 3 to 17 in the U.S. having a mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral disorder. Additionally, from 2009 to 2019, the share of high school students who reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness increased by 40%, to more than 1 in 3 students. Suicidal behaviors among high school students also increased during the decade preceding COVID, with 19% seriously considering attempting suicide, a 36% increase from 2009 to 2019, and about 16% having made a suicide plan in the prior year, a 44% increase from 2009 to 2019. Between 2007 and 2018, suicide rates among youth ages 10- 24 in the U.S. increased by 57%, and early estimates show more than 6,600 suicide deaths among this age group in 2020.³

It is important to note that these data were collected before the onset of COVID-19. The pandemic exacerbated these already tragic difficulties experienced by youth in our country by removing their contact with those who could provide physical and mental health services, adding to their anxiety by introducing new stressors such as lack of access to food and concern for their health and that of their loved ones, changing their day-to-day existence with the institution of quarantines and general avoidance of public spaces unless necessary, eliminating their social lives, and removing in-person school learning. And,

The pandemic's negative impacts most heavily affected those who were vulnerable to begin with, such as youth with disabilities, racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+ youth, low-income youth, youth in rural areas, youth in immigrant households, youth involved with the child welfare or juvenile justice systems, and homeless youth.⁴

Many researchers and national health agencies, such as the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, consider COVID-19 a natural disaster ranking among the likes of hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes, wildfires, tsunamis, and floods, and extreme weather events. This designation is afforded the pandemic because,

2. United States Department of Health and Human Services, "Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory," HHS.gov, 2021, <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>.

3. United States Department of Health and Human Services, "U.S. Surgeon General Is-sues Advisory on Youth Mental Health Crisis Further Exposed by COVID-19 Pandemic," HHS.gov, 2021, <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2021/12/07/us-surgeon-general-issues-advisory-on-youth-mental-health-crisis-further-exposed-by-covid-19-pandemic.html>, par.4. homeless youth."

4. United States Department of Health and Human Services, "U.S. Surgeon General Issues Advisory," par. 5.

(All of) these events can lead to many adversities for children and families, including displacement, loss of home and personal property, changes in schools, economic hardship, loss of community and social supports, and even the injury and death of loved ones.⁵

Events such as natural disasters that, for the person experiencing them, evoke a feeling of being intensely threatened are defined as traumas.⁶

In addition to natural disasters, there are numerous events that contribute to the exposure of a person to trauma. Well before the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers began studying these traumas, and particularly how they impact children and youth. Between 1995 and 1997, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and Kaiser Permanente Health Care Providers conducted comprehensive research which resulted in the landmark study on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). ACEs are defined as:

...potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years) such as experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect; witnessing violence in the home; and having a family member attempt or die by suicide. Also included are aspects of the child's environment that can undermine their sense of safety, stability, and bonding such as growing up in a household with substance misuse, mental health problems, or instability due to parental separation or incarceration of a parent, sibling or other member of the household.⁷

Participants in the study, who were 19 years of age or older, responded to the standardized Family Health History and Health Appraisal questionnaire. Of the study's participants, 61 percent were found to have at least one ACE and 16 percent had four or more ACEs. Further, the study uncovered the fact that for those who experienced them in their childhood, ACEs were linked to health problems such as heart disorders, cancer, asthma, kidney disease, stroke, diabetes, obesity, and depression disorders; increased engagement in hazardous behavior such as smoking and heavy drinking of alcohol; and socioeconomic risks including not finishing high school and unemployment. The higher the number of ACEs, the more risk factors that were found to be existent for each individual.

As a parallel to the CDC-Kaiser Permanente study, data was extracted from the 2016 National Survey of Children's Health. According to the National Education Association (NEA), these data, "...showed that 46 percent of America's children had experienced at least one adverse childhood experience with the number rising to 55 percent for children aged 12 to 17. One in five U.S. children had two or more ACEs."⁸ ACEs were also found to be closely correlated with poverty. Schools must be concerned with ACEs, as the toxic stress associated with these risk factors

5. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, "Disasters," The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, May 7, 2022, <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types/disasters>, par. 1.

6. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, "Trauma Types," The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, May 7, 2022, <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types>.

7. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs): Leveraging the Best Available Evidence," Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES), 2019. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/preventingACES.pdf>

8. National Education Association, "Trauma-Informed Schools," National Education Association, 2022, <https://www.nea.org/professional-excellence/student-engagment/trauma-informed-schools>, par 4.

changes brain development and impacts school academic performance as well as behavior. The NEA published a handbook containing Actionable Strategies educators and schools can implement to serve students experiencing the challenges of ACEs.⁹

The documentary film *Paper Tigers* is a must see for anyone concerned with the education of students experiencing ACEs. The film takes an intimate look inside Lincoln Alternative High School in Walla Walla, Washington, a school which has been designed around the premise of the implementation of trauma-informed practices for students. Six specific students, the principal, the intervention specialist, a Science teacher, an English/Reading teacher, and an English/Art teacher are featured in the film. The story highlights how faculty and staff use ACEs research to provide an effective school environment, and their approach to students perfectly aligns with the NEA's Actionable Strategies to effectively serve students who are victims of ACEs.

The NEA's first strategy states that school personnel must build positive and enriching relationships. The Lincoln High teachers are masters at this tactic. A highlight of the story is watching two of the teachers playing in a band with students and talking about how they connect with students through music, as this medium allows them to communicate without talking and form a stronger connection than anything that could be done in the traditional classroom setting. An especially poignant point in the film shows a teacher texting a student who has been absent from school for several days and is putting his graduation in jeopardy. The teacher expresses his unconditional care for the student despite his decision about coming back to school, and eventually succeeds in convincing the student to return. The teacher speaks of understanding how to support the student because of his recognition of the student's actions as a self-sabotaging behavior coming from a place of fear of leaving the familiarity and routine experienced in high school as a minor, and venturing into the unknown world outside the confines of the school building as a sudden adult.

The next suggestion proposed by NEA is creating a safe learning environment. Lincoln High, as an alternative school, was established as a last resort for students experiencing truancy, behavior problems, failing grades, and substance abuse. The film presents quotes from students who recall Lincoln's former reputation as a violent and suppressive school in which to be placed. The principal successfully changed the school's environment by learning the science behind assisting students experiencing ACEs, and providing professional development for the school's faculty and staff to educate them about better serving impacted students. In turn, school personnel teach students about ACEs, hence acknowledging their personal difficulties and providing a safety net for students as supportive adults who understand and know how to help them deal with their struggles. The film also shows faculty and staff discussing with each other what they see when looking at students' social media accounts. One such discussion leads to the investigation of an incident whereby a female Lincoln student is filmed by onlookers while in a violent physical altercation with a female from another school over a boy. Lincoln's intervention specialist speaks with the Lincoln student involved in the incident, and counsels her on ways to promote self-respect, build healthy relationships, and prioritize means of keeping herself safe with strategies such as finding alternatives to fighting.

Another approach posed by NEA is to teach emotional skills. Lincoln High teachers, the intervention specialist, and even the principal are shown helping students develop these skills in numerous ways. For instance, as with most school systems a school official is designated to make

9. National Education Association, "Teaching Children from Poverty and Trauma," National Education Association, 2016, <https://www.nea.org/sites/default/files/2020-07/NEAPovertyTraumaHandbook.pdf>.

home visits when students are not coming to school, and in the case of Lincoln High this person is the interventional specialist. The difference at Lincoln is that the intervention specialist sought to speak to the students about their truancy, in addition to their parents, to acknowledge and express concern regarding the reasons for their absences, communicate the desire for them to be in school, and teach them strategies to overcome emotional barriers to attending school each day. Lincoln's faculty and staff are also filmed in a meeting during which they discuss individual students and their academic needs, and brainstorm strategies to assist the students. The teachers then meet with students to talk about the personal challenges they are experiencing which are inhibiting them from making adequate academic progress and provide individualized emotional support which enables them to be successful in the classroom. Assigning zeros for assignments, which just exacerbates the feelings of failure and worthlessness already deeply engrained in the emotional existences of most Lincoln High students, was rethought to become a last resort practice.

One more proposal from NEA is to work with students who act out. Lincoln High's behavior plan was reconstructed to avoid as many out-of-school suspensions as possible to keep students in the school building, a setting much safer than the community or homes in which most Lincoln High students live. As an alternative, a supervised in-school school suspension program was developed which provides an environment where students are expected to complete their assignments and a teacher who assists them with their work. When Lincoln teachers must send students to the principal for behavior intervention, he first inquires about what is happening in the student's life and/or acknowledges what is happening from what he already knows about the student. He also works with the student to situate themselves at that moment on a behavior target he has in his office where green means they are emotionally okay, yellow means they are in a volatile mood and are more likely to react negatively to a situation, and red means they should not be making decisions or acting on thoughts at that time due to their heightened emotional state. He then provides them the space to discuss the true causes for their actions and ways to overcome the current situation, so the outcome is positive for them.

A final NEA recommendation is to give students a sense of control. It is in this area where the film's featured adults shine as the most effective of educators. Lincoln faculty and staff were troubled by repeated instances of students not attending medical and counseling appointments, even when school personnel were scheduling these opportunities for them. Therefore, they successfully advocated for a health center to be established on the school grounds to provide students with free access to doctors and mental health counselors during the school day. The opening of this facility made it possible for students to take charge of their own physical and mental health and associated treatment needs. Teachers also use school time to guide interested students through the college application process instead of considering this to be something that should be done on the students' own time. Lincoln teachers acknowledge that the adults in the students' lives outside of school may not know how to help students navigate the process, and consider applying for college to be a logical offshoot of the high school education they provide and something with which they want to help the students who desire to pursue higher education. One exceptional point in the film shows the three featured teachers taking a student on a college visit. Ironically, this is the same aforementioned student who was at risk of not graduating.

For all of the wonderful strategies presented in the film, one important strategy is missing. That is, the film does not delve into the realities of the world outside the walls of Lincoln High School and how students will navigate that world without the support of people around them who are trauma informed. Despite this omission, there is true beauty in this film which lies with the

hope that is provided for students by Lincoln faculty and staff. This hope is much needed by these students whose ACEs are so numerous that life often seems futile.

Some may note that the date of the film is 2015 and consider it to be aged. However, given the aforementioned impact of COVID-19 on learning loss and trauma on the part of America's youth, it is well worth revisiting *Paper Tigers*. Just as the children and adolescents in our country are struggling to find ways to cope with their educational needs and traumas, so too are the adults who are educating them. Despite its age, this incredible film can enlighten these educators as to strategies for helping traumatized students. All educators and those concerned with the effective education of students must watch and learn from *Paper Tigers*.

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