

Albany community's interest in impact of childhood trauma rises

Symposium details ways to address trauma and build resilience

By Claire Hughes

When Allison Sampson-Jackson talks to kids who have experienced abuse or witnessed violence she is all energy and encouragement and in-your-face praise, like she was at the LaSalle School Thursday, as she helps them understand what trauma does to their brains.

If she works with them a while, they learn to recognize stress responses in each other: "His amygdala's on fire!" they'll say when someone explodes or gets aggressive, referring to the brain's flight-or-fight center. And then: "Send him some supports!"

Sampson-Jackson, a therapist who knows trauma personally from her own youth, brings her knowledge of neurological functioning to the kids' level because she wants them to understand what's happening — so they can change it.

She also spoke at The Egg Friday for a growing group of Capital Region professionals, from doctors to police officers, who want to understand how to address trauma and build resilience. Among her key messages is that anyone can become the person who cares enough to step back and explore why a young person is exhibiting "bad behaviors" and address them with compassion.

"You don't have to be a person with letters behind their name to do that in a person's life," said Sampson-Jackson, who speaks in a TED Talk from last year about a man named Howard who helped her through childhood.

Nearly 900 people showed up at The Empire State Plaza's Center for the Performing Arts Friday to hear Sampson-Jackson and other experts in childhood trauma as part of a daylong symposium hosted by the LaSalle School through a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The fourth such event sponsored by the school, interest has risen dramatically from the first gathering in 2014 of 200 people at the school's own theater, said Bill Wolff, the school's executive director.

He sees it as an indication that the community is becoming more aware of the need to treat people involved in violence or drug use, for instance, for the problems underlying their actions. The emerging awareness comes out of a long-running study by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the California-based health maintenance organization Kaiser Permanente on Adverse Childhood Experiences.

ACEs, as they're called, include physical and sexual abuse, divorce, living with a parent who abuses alcohol or drugs, and feeling unloved. The more ACEs that someone experiences, the greater their chances of using drugs or alcohol, or trying to kill themselves, for instance. ACEs raise the risk of childhood disease and can shorten a person's lifespan.

But, Sampson-Jackson noted, scans of the brain now show that new neural pathways can develop when someone experiences kindness or compassion.



At LaSalle, understanding of ACEs has led to small, concrete and important changes in approach, Wolff said. On Thursday, for instance, one teen couldn't sit through a half-hour session with Sampson-Jackson. Five years ago, staff might have reprimanded the student for being rude. But this week, they let him exit and asked what was wrong. It turned out something Sampson-Jackson had said triggered memories and stress for him.

More than half the 75 adolescent boys who live at LaSalle have ACEs scores of five or higher, Wolff said. They arrive at the school due to neglect, abuse, living with substance abuse in their homes or being the victims of violence.

In the city of Albany, about 26 percent of children in Albany have two or more ACEs, according to the Data Resource Center for Child & Adolescent Health. That compares with 18 percent in New York and 23 percent nationally.

David Wallace, an associate executive director at LaSalle, compared the community response to local daily trauma to what happens where there is a violent event that affects many people at once, like the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut five years ago. The federal government sent resources to the school to help students cope with that tragedy.

"Some kids live Sandy Hook every day of their life," Wallace said, "and are getting no resources. In Albany."