

DAYTONA BEACH NEWS-JOURNAL

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Author prepares teachers for troubled children Principal: These issues more common

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DATE: July 30, 2005
PUBLICATION: Daytona Beach News-Journal (FL)
EDITION: Final
SECTION: Section C
PAGE: 01C

DAYTONA BEACH - Classroom teachers typically aren't trained to deal with mental health problems - which would be fine if their students were mostly emotionally healthy kids from well-functioning families. But that hasn't been the case for a long time, according to Ruth Herman Wells, an Oregon-based author, mental health expert and trainer.

"Your training prepares you for Beaver Cleaver," she told Volusia County educators and pastors participating in a workshop Thursday and Friday. Teachers must also prepare for the one child in 10 - or more - with family problems that might include incest, drugs and violence.

The workshop at Tubman King Community Church, sponsored by the Daytona Beach **Black Clergy Alliance**, focused on troubled children of all races and backgrounds.

Today's average mainstream classroom includes significant numbers of kids who are "held together with spit and glue and not much more," Wells said.

Such children may come to school aggressive and angry, sad and "shut down," out of control and uncommunicative - and they present a major challenge to teachers who feel more pressure than ever to prepare their charges to do well on standardized tests.

Wells estimated 10 to 15 percent of the nation's schoolchildren have substance abuse in their families or are experiencing it themselves. About the same percentage are being verbally, physically or emotionally abused at home.

And studies indicate more than 20 percent are dealing with what Wells called the biggest problem: sexual abuse, primarily in the form of incest. "It's not 'stranger danger,'" she said.

Such abuse "doesn't spare any group," she said. "The numbers are grim." The child who comes to school late, tired, distressed and depressed might be hard to teach because he is "enduring real horrors" at home, she said.

Moreover, most teachers can expect to have a budding sociopath or two in their classrooms. While the term sociopath is reserved for people 18 or older, Wells said that as many as 15 percent of school-age children have antisocial personalities.

"It's a disorder of conscience," she said.

Such children don't feel remorse or empathy and are "not wired to give a riff."