

What Parents Should Know About Trauma and Children's Behavior, According to Rocio Graciano

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Los Angeles, California Feb 10, 2026 (IssueWire.com) - As more children show signs of emotional distress in schools and at home, understanding the connection between trauma and behavior has become increasingly important for families. [Rocio Graciano](#), a veteran social work leader with more than 20 years of experience supporting student mental health in large public school systems, says many behaviors parents find confusing or alarming are often signals of unmet emotional needs rather than defiance or discipline problems. "Trauma does not always look the way people expect it to," Graciano explains. "It can show up as withdrawal, irritability, sudden changes in mood, difficulty concentrating, or challenges with relationships. These behaviors are often a child's way of communicating that something feels unsafe or overwhelming."

Rocio Graciano currently serves as a Specialist in District Support Programs at a regional office within a central public school district, where she provides leadership and guidance to mental health teams across more than 200 schools. Her work focuses on crisis response, suicide prevention, threat assessment, and trauma-informed systems that support both students and staff. She has also helped train approximately 4,000 educators in trauma-responsive practices, giving her a broad view of how children's emotional struggles surface across different ages and settings.

According to Graciano, one of the most common misunderstandings among parents is the belief that trauma only stems from extreme events. In reality, trauma can result from a range of experiences, including family instability, community violence, chronic stress, loss, or ongoing exposure to uncertainty. Even events that adults may see as manageable can feel overwhelming to a child, especially when protective supports are limited. "When children experience stress without enough support, their nervous systems stay heightened," Graciano says. "This can affect how they behave, learn, and interact with others. What looks like misbehavior is often a stress response."

Rocio Graciano encourages parents to shift from asking "What's wrong with my child?" to "What might my child be responding to?" This change in perspective can open the door to more compassionate and practical support. She emphasizes that understanding does not mean removing boundaries, but rather setting them in ways that are predictable, calm, and supportive.

Consistency is one of the most potent protective factors parents can offer. Regular routines, clear expectations, and steady responses help children feel safe, even when they are struggling emotionally. Graciano also advises parents to pay attention to changes in behavior rather than isolated incidents. Sudden shifts in sleep, appetite, academic engagement, or social connection may signal that a child needs additional support.

Another key message [Rocio Graciano](#) shares with families is the importance of emotional validation. "Children need to know their feelings are seen and taken seriously," she explains. "That does not mean agreeing with every behavior, but it does mean acknowledging emotions and helping children learn how to manage them."

Building resilience, Graciano notes, is not about teaching children to ignore difficult experiences. It is about strengthening protective factors that help buffer the impact of stress over time. Supportive

relationships with adults, opportunities to develop coping skills, and environments that feel emotionally safe all play a role in long-term well-being.

Graciano also encourages parents to partner closely with schools. Teachers, counselors, and school social workers often see patterns that can provide valuable insight into a child's experience. Open communication between families and schools helps ensure children receive consistent messages and coordinated support across settings. "Parents are not expected to have all the answers," Graciano says. "What matters most is being present, curious, and willing to seek support when needed. Asking for help is a strength, not a failure."

As schools across the country report rising concerns related to student anxiety, emotional regulation, and social connection, Rocio Graciano believes parents play a critical role in prevention and early intervention. By understanding how trauma can influence behavior, families are better equipped to respond with empathy, structure, and care.

Graciano's work continues to focus on helping systems and families work together to support children's mental health. Her message to parents is clear. When children feel safe, supported, and understood, they are better able to heal, learn, and thrive.

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