

Trauma-informed Practice

The goal of trauma-informed practice is to develop positive relationships and learning environments where all students feel safe and supported, including students who have experienced trauma.



Key understandings

- Traumatic experiences occur in students' lives more frequently than many of us realize.
- When a student experiences frequent or prolonged adversity such as physical, sexual or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, or exposure to violence, substance abuse or poverty, the stress experience can become intolerable and toxic.
- Toxic stress can derail healthy development and can result in trauma. This is especially true when a student has no caring adult to act as a buffer.
- Students who have been exposed to danger that is unpredictable and uncontrollable live much of their lives in survival mode. They respond to the world as a place of constant danger, even if the events happened months or years earlier.
- Trauma impacts brain development, and as a result, can affect students' ability to learn and to recognize emotions and regulate their attention and behaviour. This may result in impulsive or aggressive behaviour or the opposite, extreme withdrawal and inattentiveness.
- When educators understand trauma, they are less likely to view trauma-related behaviours as intentional or as stemming from a lack of motivation or laziness. This understanding will reduce punitive types of responses that can re-traumatize students.
- Creating safe, supportive learning environments and developing positive relationships with students who have experienced trauma plays a key role in mitigating its effects.

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So often, trauma happens in relationships, but it is also in relationships that healing occurs.

*Dr. Bruce Perry,
Child Trauma Academy*

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Questions for discussion

- How would you describe your staff's current understanding of the effects of trauma on learning? Is this a topic of conversation and interest for your school? Why or why not?
- What are you already doing in your school that supports trauma-informed practice?
- Are there current activities or practices in your school that might not feel safe for some students and could cause harm to students who have experienced trauma? How could these practices be improved?
- How could using trauma-informed practice change relationships between students, students and school staff, school staff and community partners, and school staff and families?
- What school-wide approaches are currently being implemented that could be leveraged to better support social-emotional learning?

Taking the Pulse

at the school and authority level...

Assessing system readiness

- How is data being used to help inform planning and implementing safe and supportive learning environments that consider the effects of trauma on students' development?
- What expertise and resources are available at the school or jurisdictional level to support implementation of trauma-informed practices? What expertise and resources are available in the community?
- How is your school authority supporting professional development related to understanding the effects of trauma on learning and behaviour?

(Adapted from *A Guide to Support Implementation: Essential Conditions*, www.essentialconditions.ca)

For more information

- *Helping Traumatized Children Learn, Volume 2: Creating and Advocating for Trauma-Sensitive Schools*—Developed by the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, this 2013 resource offers a process for creating trauma-sensitive schools. <http://traumasensitiveschools.org/tlpi-publications/>

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When we talk about how important it is to create safe and caring environments, we are talking about creating the kind of environment, emotional as well as physical, that turns off a child's alarm. This produces a shift from what neuroscientists call the 'survival brain' to the 'learning brain.' ”

Dr. Stuart Shanker, York University

Research

The Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, a collaboration between Massachusetts Advocates for Children and Harvard Law School, offers comprehensive research on how trauma impacts the development and learning of children and youth.

<http://traumasensitiveschools.org/get-involved/creating-trauma-sensitive-schools/>

Alberta Example

The Alberta Family Wellness Initiative website offers a four-minute video, *How Brains are Built: The Core Story of Brain Development* (2013), that presents the science of toxic stress and brain development in an engaging, easy-to-understand style.

<http://www.albertafamilywellness.org/resources/video/how-brains-are-built-core-story-brain-development>