Trauma-Sensitive Practices in Schools

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Multitiered Approach to Trauma

- **Tier 1:**
  - Universal interventions
  - For all students
  - Preventive, proactive
  - **School-wide strategies for addressing trauma and building resilience**

- **Tier 2:**
  - Secondary interventions
    - For some group students exposed/at risk
    - Group interventions

- **Tier 3:**
  - Tertiary interventions individualized
    - Specific trauma interventions

**Intensity of need and response**

- Upward arrow indicating increasing intensity
In a trauma-sensitive school, **all aspects** of the educational environment—from workforce training to engagement with students and families to procedures and policies—are grounded in an **understanding of trauma and its impact** and are designed to promote resilience for all.

**The approach may require changes to mission, vision, practices, policies, and culture.**
### Shifting Perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Perspective</th>
<th>Trauma-Sensitive Perspective</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understands behaviors as the result of individual deficits (e.g., what’s wrong with you?). Uses negative labels.</td>
<td>Considers whether behaviors may be ways of coping with traumatic experiences.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understands difficult behaviors as purposeful.</td>
<td>Understands that difficult behaviors may be automatic responses.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focuses on the individual.</td>
<td>Considers the role of the environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Views adult authority and control as critical to student success.</td>
<td>Encourages student and family choice and control.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Punitive discipline is the primary approach.</td>
<td>Positive, strengths-based approaches to discipline are used most often.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Support for students exposed to trauma should be left to counseling professionals.</td>
<td>Assumes a shared responsibility for addressing trauma.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trauma glasses off</td>
<td>Trauma glasses on</td>
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<td>---------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Manipulative</td>
<td>Getting needs met in ways that have worked in the past. Doing whatever is necessary to survive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lazy</td>
<td>Overwhelmed. Underdeveloped executive functioning skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resistant</td>
<td>Mistrustful of others due to history of being hurt by others. Scared to make progress and then lose everything.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disrespectful</td>
<td>Feeling threatened, unsafe, out of control.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attention-seeking</td>
<td>Feeling disconnected, alone, or unheard by others. Looking for connection.</td>
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Core Principles

• **Understand** trauma and its impact.
• **Believe** that healing happens in relationships.
• **Ensure** emotional and physical safety.
• **View** students holistically.
• **Support** choice, control, and empowerment for students, staff, and families.
• **Strive** for cultural competence.
• **Use** a collaborative approach.
Trauma-Sensitive Practices

Establish physical safety.

- The physical environment is **well maintained, well lit, and well monitored**.

- The school environment **reflects the diverse backgrounds** and experiences of the students and communities served (in pictures, posters, media, and other materials).

- **Rules and student rights are posted**, and expectations for behavior are positively outlined.

- The school works to **keep students safe** from bullying and violence while at school.

- The school has safe, **quiet spaces** for students to go if they feel overwhelmed or dysregulated.
Trauma-Sensitive Practices

Support emotional safety

- Staff strive to be responsive, calm, and respectful in their interactions with students and parents.

- Student expectations are clear and enforced consistently.

- Adults actively address any and all instances of potentially traumatic experiences, such as bias, bullying, exclusion, or disrespect, that happen at school.
Trauma-Sensitive Practices

Support emotional safety

- Discipline practices are safe, respectful, and reparative.
- Adults are able to recognize possible trauma-related responses.
- School practices minimize students’ experiences of powerlessness. The school conveys respect for cultural differences in communication styles, language, values, experiences with authority figures, and perceptions of safety.
- Students and parents are given opportunities to voice their opinions or concerns.
Trauma-Sensitive Practices

Recognize and reduce trauma-related triggers.

**Trauma reminders/triggers:** Reminders of past traumatic experiences that automatically cause the body to react as if the traumatic event is happening again in that moment.

Trauma-sensitive schools:

- Identify potential trauma reminders for students and parents.
- Recognize possible trauma responses.
- Minimize trauma triggers in the education environment.
Trauma-Sensitive Practices

Triggers for students include:

- Loud, chaotic environments;
- Physical touch, uncertainty about expectations, or changes in routine;
- Situations involving authority figures and limit setting, even appropriate ones;
- Hand or body gestures that appear threatening;
- Witnessing violence between others, such as peers fighting;
- Emergency vehicles and police or fire personnel;
- Particular reminders of an event (e.g., smells, weather, time of year); and
- Areas of the school experienced as unsafe, such as bathrooms or less well monitored areas.
Trauma-Sensitive Practices

- Triggers for students include:
  - Verbal and physical aggression or defiance;
  - Running away, refusing to talk, avoidance, substance use, and other risky behaviors; and
  - Appearing numb or disconnected.

- Survival responses to triggers include:

- Triggers for parents include:
Trauma-Sensitive Practices

Triggers for students include:

- Being called into a meeting to address their child’s behaviors;
- Feeling disrespected by school staff;
- Uncertainty about what is happening;
- Lack of control over decisions being made about their child; and
- History of negative experiences with the education system.

Survival responses to triggers include:

Triggers for parents include:
Trauma-Sensitive Practices

Prevent and manage crises.

- Staff **recognize early warning signs** of students being triggered based on mood or behavioral changes that indicate agitation, fear, or anger.

- Adults attend to what is happening, **validate feelings**, listen, offer encouragement and choice, and provide positive reinforcement.

- Staff use **nonverbal strategies**, such as body language, space, and use of grounding techniques, to deescalate crises.

- Staff **avoid giving directions**, punishing, or arguing during a crisis.

- Adults **repair relationships** after a crisis and plan ahead for future challenges.
Establish and maintain clear, predictable routines and rituals that foster self-regulation.

Plan for changes and transitions, and anticipate student responses.

Set clear rules and expectations, and enforce them consistently and respectfully.

Be aware of potential triggers around limit setting.

Consider possible underlying patterns/root causes of behavior.

Consequences are directly related to the behavior and emphasize repairing connections.
Classroom strategies for creating safety:

- Use respectful language and tone.
- Adopt a positive, strengths-based approach.
- Use praise and reinforce positive behaviors.
- Avoid public confrontations that could be embarrassing or shaming for students.
- Provide opportunities for student choice and sense of control.
- Check your assumptions and biases about why a student may be reacting in a particular way and be aware of your own feelings before reacting.
Trauma-Sensitive Schools Framework
Domains of Trauma Sensitivity

1. Support Staff Development.
2. Create a Safe and Supportive Environment.
5. Collaborate With Students and Families.
6. Adapt Policies and Procedures
Universal Trauma-Sensitive Strategies

- **Educating** all school staff about trauma and its effects
- Promoting a **safe physical and emotional environment**
- **Eliminating retraumatizing practices** (e.g., harsh, punitive approaches)
- **Providing** trauma-sensitive assessments and services
- Building students’ **social-emotional skills** to cope with adversity
- **Promoting** youth and family voice, choice, and empowerment
- **Adopting policies and procedures** that align with and support a universal, trauma-sensitive approach
Understanding Trauma and Its Impact
- E-resource
- Companion slide presentation and activity packet for in-person training

Building Trauma-Sensitive Schools
- Online module for all staff
- Handouts
- Facilitation guide

Leading Trauma-Sensitive Schools
- Online module for leaders
- Action guide
- Facilitation guide

https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/trauma-sensitive-schools-training-package
Thank you for the work that you do and your time today

For more information, please contact
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Questions?


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References


References


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