

# Trauma-Informed Strategies for Building Relationships with Students

**“Relationships are one of the key factors of resilience in trauma-impacted youths’ lives. They are the bedrock of trauma-informed care.”**

– Sam Himmelstein

**Attunement**<sup>i,ii</sup> is derived from mindfulness practices. It is the quality of being in tune with oneself and in relationship with others. In the context of working with children and youth, it encompasses creating a safe space for them to express feelings and offering nonjudgmental feedback about thoughts, behaviors, or circumstances.

**“The simple practice of attuning to yourself [will have] a profound impact on the relationship.”**

– Sam Himmelstein

**Authenticity**<sup>iii,iv,v</sup> is a practice derived from attachment theory and positive psychology. It is characterized as the interrelationship of four components: awareness about oneself; objective self-evaluation; behaving in ways aligned with core needs and values; and relating to others in ways that create trust.

**“When you show up over and over and over again, as yourself, as predictable, as consistent, you’re basically telling them I am a safe person.”**

– Sam Himmelstein

**Deep Listening**<sup>vi</sup> is a kind of listening characterized by: avoiding judgment; cultivating empathy; paying attention to feelings, inflections, and body language beyond spoken words; and focusing on understanding instead of responding.

**“Isn’t that amazing to say in this day and age, one of the best interventions you can do with adolescents is literally just listen to them?”**

– Sam Himmelstein

**Skillful Self-Disclosure**<sup>vii,viii</sup> is explicitly used for building trust in relationships. It is a technique that reveals one’s intentions, thinking process, emotions, and values with appropriate professional boundaries.

**“The word skillful is important because in some fields we can overdo it and that makes the relationship not safe.”**

– Sam Himmelstein

i Geller, S., & Porges, S. (2014). Therapeutic presence: Neurophysiological mechanisms mediating feeling safe in therapeutic relationships. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration, 24*(3), 178-192.

ii Siegel, D. (2010). *The mindful therapist*. New York, NY: Norton.

iii Himmelstein, S. (2013). *A mindfulness-based approach to working with high-risk adolescents*. New York, NY: Routledge.

iv Himmelstein, S. (2019). *Trauma-informed mindfulness with teens: A guide for mental health professionals*. New York, NY: Norton.

v Kolden, G., Wang, C., Austin, S., Chang, Y., & Klein, M. (2018). Congruence/genuineness: A meta-analysis. *Psychotherapy, 55*(4), 424-433.

vi Miller, R., & Rollnick, S. (2013). *Motivational interviewing: Helping people change* (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Guilford.

vii Chan, A. (2018). Trust-building in the mentoring of students of color. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning, 26*(1), 4-29.

viii Melotti, G., Potì, S., Ganesini, G., & Brighi, A. (2018). Adolescents at risk of delinquency: The role of parental control, trust, and disclosure. *Deviant Behavior, 39*(3), 347-362.

## Trauma-Informed Strategies for Building Relationships with Students

### Reflection Questions

1. Given the work you do with children and youth, does Himmelstein’s assertion that relationships “are the bedrock of trauma-informed care” resonate? Explain.

2. Consider the four relationship-building skills Himmelstein discusses:

- In what ways do you and your colleagues use these skills in your work?
- How might you and your colleagues continue to develop these skills?
- If you use these skills, how have they affected the outcome of your work?

3. What is one thing you or your organization can do to support the consistent use of these skills?