



TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE BULLETIN

# Trauma-Informed Classrooms

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NATIONAL COUNCIL OF  
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# Trauma-Informed Classrooms

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## 1 TRAUMA

Trauma is defined as any event that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful because the individual perceives his life or the life of someone he loves as threatened. Traumatic events include:

- Community violence
- Domestic violence
- Sex trafficking
- Serious medical illness
- Natural disasters
- Neglect
- Physical abuse
- Displacement and refugee trauma
- School violence
- Sexual abuse
- Terrorism
- Loss of a loved one/traumatic grief
- Psychological maltreatment

## Introduction

The impact of students' life experiences on their behavior has garnered increasing attention as schools strive to develop more supportive academic environments that help youths manage stress and address the needs of at-risk youths to facilitate continued academic engagement.<sup>1,2</sup> Few events outside the classroom have as profound an impact on multiple domains of student development as traumatic life experiences. Trauma is any event experienced by an individual that is physically or emotionally harmful because the individual perceives his life or the life of someone he loves as threatened (see *Sidebar 1, Trauma*). An estimated 25% of youths in the general population have experienced a traumatic event and nearly 75% of youths involved with the juvenile justice system.<sup>1,3</sup> In addition to traumatic life events, youths also face adverse childhood experiences and daily stressors that might further compromise their ability to navigate the academic and behavioral requirements of a school setting. Understanding youths' responses to these challenges and having trauma-informed responses are essential for educators aiming to maximize students' academic and social-emotional potential.

The range of student responses to traumatic life events varies based on individual and environmental factors. Traumatic life experiences often disorient an individual by distorting perceptions of the world and creating a profound sense of unsafety.<sup>4</sup> Some youths who experience traumatic life events display minimal adverse reactions because individual and environmental protective factors are present that support an ongoing sense of safety while fostering resilience—an ability to remain intact after challenging life experiences.<sup>5</sup> In addition to resilience, some youths recover from traumatic life experiences more quickly due to the presence of these individual and environmental factors (see *Sidebar 2, Individual and Environmental*).

The aim of a trauma-informed classroom is to infuse an understanding of the impact of trauma and adverse life experiences on students into the classroom culture and promote a physically and psychologically safe environment to foster student growth. More specifically,



psychological safety refers to individuals' inner sense that they are safe because of their ability to feel capable of managing stressors or connecting with someone else who can help the individual manage stressors that make her feel unsafe. From an organizational perspective, implementing a trauma-informed approach, "realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in [individuals] involved in the system; responds by integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization" (Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2016).<sup>6</sup> While administrators and school policy-makers are generally responsible for establishing trauma-informed practices school-wide, educators play an integral role in developing a classroom structure that promotes safety, appropriately uses disciplinary action and related resources such as school resource officers, and helps students manage overwhelming responses to stress—the heart of a trauma-informed approach.

## 2 INDIVIDUAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL

Individual and environmental factors that foster resilience and recovery are internal and external resources that help youth who have experienced trauma manage their reactions to traumatic experiences in a healthy manner.

- Problem-solving and stress management skills
- Connection with healthy support systems (e.g., family, faith-community, clubs, etc.)
- Finding meaning and hope in difficult situations
- Family modeling a healthy response to stressful life events
- Preserved feeling of control
- Responsiveness from a support system when experiencing trauma
- Access to mental health resources
- School connectedness



## Recognizing the Impact of Trauma in the Classroom

For many youths who experience traumatic life events, the ability to manage stress becomes compromised.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, after a traumatic life event, youths may find situations that were previously manageable now prompt feelings of being emotionally or physically unsafe. The school environment presents youths with several stressors that can trigger traumatic stress reactions—extreme responses to perceived threats that interfere with youths’ functioning. Youths’ stress responses can range in intensity, duration, and frequency. Traumatic stress can lead to youths’ development of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The Diagnostic Statistical Manual Fifth Edition (DSM-5) identifies four categories of traumatic stress reactions that can disrupt the functioning of an individual diagnosed with PTSD following a traumatic life experience: avoidance of trauma reminders, negative alterations in cognitions and mood, re-experiencing the traumatic event by having intrusive thoughts and feelings, and alterations in arousal and reactivity (e.g., hyperarousal, numb feelings, etc.). Additionally, some individuals experience ongoing dissociation—an intense feeling of being disconnected from others and oneself. While the diagnosis of PTSD requires experiencing several of these traumatic stress reactions and having substantial

disruption in functioning, individuals can experience degrees of traumatic stress reactions that fail to meet criteria but nonetheless create distress for the individual. The traumatic stress reactions outlined by the DSM-5 PTSD criteria provide a framework for understanding how trauma might impact students in key domains of functioning and, subsequently, the impact of trauma on the classroom.

## **Brain, Trauma, and the Stress Response**

Our brains are wired to protect us from threat, and no experience better represents threat than a traumatic event. Prior to experiencing a traumatic event, our bodies naturally respond to stress by activating a series of physiological events that are intended to keep us safe. First, the part of the brain responsible for processing emotion and threat, the limbic system, helps determine how stressful or threatening the situation is in order to mobilize an adequate additional response from the brain and body to maintain safety. Often this continued stress response involves activation of the sympathetic nervous system enabling people to fight against the perceived threat, flee from the threat, or freeze in response to the threat. The frontal lobes and particularly the pre-frontal cortex, a part of the brain responsible for impulse control and decision-making, work to temper this stress response by ensuring an individual is accurately reading a situation and making the best decision in response to a perceived threat. When a threat or stressor overwhelms the individual, then the limbic system may keep the stress response activated at a high level—interfering with the frontal lobes’ ability to operate and ultimately contributing to a perpetual mental state of being in “survival mode.”

Essentially, a student who experiences a traumatic event is at risk for constantly being triggered into a survival mode mindset, particularly when navigating stressful situations in school. These triggers represent reminders of trauma that a student may or may not be aware exist but still feels a need to protect him- or herself from being physically, socially, and/or emotionally hurt. A heightened awareness for threats can disrupt several domains of

functioning, including relationships, information processing and decision-making, and behavior in the classroom and at home.

## Relationships and Trauma

The types of relationships students form in school are a reflection of their relationships at home and in their communities. From birth, youths begin to connect with their caregivers in a manner that fosters secure attachments, a sense of connectedness and safety, or insecure attachments, feelings of disconnectedness and uncertainty about safety. When students develop secure attachments early in life, they are better equipped to develop equitable relationships with peers and adults that reflect fairness, trust, and safety. Secure attachments are bolstered when other caring adults, such as educators, are able to develop relationships with students that further support student beliefs that adults are individuals who generally support them.

The presence of traumatic life experiences early in life can erode youths' sense of trust in others and make it difficult to form healthy relationships. This is particularly the case for youths who have experienced interpersonal trauma such as physical or sexual abuse. Interpersonal forms of trauma have been linked to increased levels of delinquency, aggression, and other maladaptive behaviors that can interfere with building trusting relationships and place youths at risk for entering the juvenile justice system.<sup>7</sup> A prominent traumatic stress reaction involves distortions about oneself and others. These distortions may reflect a learned pattern of hypervigilance that accurately and inaccurately detects threats from others, produces a negative outlook on the future due to an overwhelming feeling that painful experiences from the past will be repeated, or encourages a deflated sense of self that reflects a belief that the trauma has permanently damaged the individual. When these reactions persist, students who experienced trauma may resist building close relationships with others, and those students who desire improved relationships may find themselves interacting in a manner that frequently makes others feel uncomfortable or threatened.

In the classroom, these traumatic stress reactions can disrupt the academic experience by creating interpersonal conflicts that require a trauma-informed perspective to resolve. The interpersonal demands of the classroom are multifaceted and filtered through the cultural experiences and expectations of the teacher and students. As such, ordinary interpersonal interactions such as asking a student about his weekend, requiring a student to work with peers, or simply removing the student from class without probing for the reason behind a particular behavior might prompt escalated disruptive behavior. Reasons for escalation can include the students experiencing domestic violence during the weekend, peers in their group bullying youths, or an out-of-school suspension, which places youths back into a dangerous environment where community violence is prevalent and there is likely to be contact with law enforcement. When conflict becomes normative, it is easier to attribute challenges to immutable character traits of youths instead of environmental factors driving behavior and viewing students as malleable with the ability to succeed interpersonally in the classroom. A trauma-informed perspective facilitates this shift in perception and provides tools for increasing students' abilities to manage interpersonal challenges related to traumatic experiences.

## **Cognitive Ability and Trauma**

Academic demands require students to engage several cognitive functions including problem-solving, focused and selective attention, and the ability to shift between multiple tasks. These executive functioning skills are developed cumulatively through practice over time and developmentally appropriate support. Cognitive abilities are strengthened when healthy brain development is supported by opportunities for youths to use the skills they are learning in a safe environment that permits trial and error. When students are encouraged to view failure and mistakes as temporary challenges that can be overcome with the skills they are developing and/or support from others, they acquire cognitive abilities that foster resilience in the face of challenges.<sup>8</sup>

When a traumatic life event occurs, it potentially leaves youths

### 3 CLASSROOM TRIGGERS

Classroom triggers/trauma reminders are situations, people, activities, and any other action that remind the student of the trauma. Sometimes these triggers/reminders can prompt a traumatic stress reaction. When students and teachers are aware of these triggers/reminders they are better able to manage them. Examples include:

- Yelling, arguments, or fighting
- People who look similar to an individual involved with trauma
- Time of year such as an anniversary of a loss, holiday, birthday etc.
- Smells reminding of someone or something related to a trauma
- Music and sounds that were connected with a traumatic experience
- Physical touch
- Isolation

with a perpetual sense of unsafety that prompts using cognitive skills to secure safety. This survival mode mindset can interfere with youths' ability to concentrate, sleep due to ongoing intrusive thoughts related to the trauma, and make smart and informed decisions because youths' stress response may frequently activate and interfere with executive functioning skills. In the classroom, this may impact a student's ability to remain focused on the lesson. This unfocused state can lead to being distracted by others in class, frequent disorganization and poor planning skills, or daydreaming that mirrors extreme disinterest in the class. A trauma-informed perspective prompts educators to investigate whether there are trauma reminders in the classroom that are eliciting traumatic stress reactions in youths such as hypervigilance or dissociation (see *Sidebar 3, Classroom Triggers*). Furthermore, a trauma-informed proactive approach facilitates the creation of a safe classroom environment while addressing classroom factors that detract from students' focus and learning.



## Behavior and Trauma

Effective behavior management is a cornerstone for rich academic environments in which students and educators are comfortable immersing themselves in the pursuit of learning objectives without fear of criticism from others. Student behavior management is often a combination of adults creating developmentally appropriate structured environments and youths building effective self-

regulation skills. Caregivers provide the initial context for youths to learn limit-setting, develop empathy for others, negotiate interactions, and manage emotions while building self-awareness about how their behavior impacts others. These lessons are often taught with punitive measures that aim to penalize misbehavior and reinforcement that aims to encourage positive behavior. As schools have shifted toward a Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework, it has become increasingly clear that students best manage behavior when positive behavior is acknowledged and supported and misbehavior is redirected with disciplinary actions. PBIS frameworks help students learn better ways to express themselves while receiving the appropriate consequences for their misbehavior (in contrast to exclusionary discipline practices that can reinforce unwanted behaviors).<sup>9</sup>

A traumatic experience can disrupt both the structure of an environment and an individual's self-control. When caregivers feel incapable of protecting youths from traumatic life experiences, especially as a result of their own previous trauma and adversity (e.g., community violence, abuse from a more dominant family member, etc.), youths are at risk for living in unstructured and unsafe environments. These environments increase the likelihood of exposure to trauma and development of survival coping skills, which are the byproduct of a survival mindset and often involve unhealthy behaviors to manage the distressing experience of traumatic stress reactions (see *Sidebar 4, Survival Coping Strategies*). Dysregulated behavior is more likely to occur when the abuse is perpetrated by a caregiver and youths receive minimal support to attain physical and psychological safety. As youths employ survival coping strategies that provide an immediate sense of security or escape from distress, they are led to believe that these unhealthy behaviors are the best strategy to maintain safety. These unhealthy behaviors, in turn, place them at greater risk for contact with the juvenile justice system.

Dysregulated behavior in the classroom can consume the other students' attention when adequate measures for addressing misbehavior are absent. Dysregulated behavior reflecting traumatic stress reactions and survival coping often stem from perceived

## 4 SURVIVAL COPING STRATEGIES

Survival coping strategies, a byproduct of traumatic stress reactions, are unhealthy responses to stressful life situations after experiencing a trauma. These reactions interfere with school, work, and relationships. Examples include:

- Substance use
- Aggressive behavior
- Shame and excessive guilt
- Self-harm behavior
- Zoning out/dissociation
- Nightmares and flashbacks
- Numbing or little emotional feeling/expression
- Over-sexualized behavior
- Regressive behavior or acting younger than actual age
- Joining a gang or carrying a weapon
- Avoiding stressful situations
- Misreading social situations to believe others are threatening
- Feeling excessively depressed or anxious

## 5 SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS

Secondary traumatic stress refers to stress responses an individual has when frequently interacting with others who are displaying dysregulated behavior due to traumatic stress reactions. Common signs include:

- Difficulties concentrating
- Fatigue
- Depressed and anxious moods
- Negative thoughts
- Unwillingness to take on new tasks
- Isolation from or avoidance of others
- Lack of enjoyment from activities that were once enjoyable

threats to physical and/or psychological safety such as teasing from peers, perceived unfairness from the teacher, or behavior from others that the student believes is disrespectful. While conflict is normative, it can escalate when educators focus strictly on stopping the behavior instead of addressing the driving force prompting the behavior. Trauma-informed approaches to managing behavior in the classroom provide the necessary limit-setting and consequences to deter dysregulated behavior while integrating the supports to help dysregulated students practice healthy behaviors to express themselves and achieve a sense of safety. While many of the strategies educators use in the classroom to manage student behaviors are predicated upon the support of administration to provide trauma-informed training and resources, educators exploring the use of disciplinary action that seeks to help students learn alternative strategies to manage situations can provide a potent starting point for creating a trauma-informed classroom. Collectively, these strategies limit the likelihood that students will require intervention from the juvenile justice system and the use of law enforcement.

## Educators and Trauma

Creating an academic environment that meets the many demands placed upon educators is a stressful task. It is estimated that 17% of public school teachers report leaving the profession before their fifth year, often as a result of low salary and insufficient school resources as primary contributors to their departure.<sup>10</sup> It is important to build a classroom that fosters a sense of safety for students, but teachers who lack a similar level of support are at risk for experiencing adverse impacts of working in a stressful environment as well. A primary risk factor for working with youths who have experienced trauma is developing secondary traumatic stress (STS). STS occurs when an individual has ongoing exposure to others' traumatic stress reactions and develops traumatic stress reactions in response (*see Sidebar 5, Secondary Traumatic Stress*). Teachers may also experience vicarious trauma, or compassion fatigue, when overextending themselves to understand and empathize with students.

Both STS and vicarious trauma deplete educators' resources and create challenges to self-care (see *Sidebar 6, Self-care Strategies*). This is further complicated when educators and other school personnel have unresolved trauma histories that may be triggered when interacting with students. Educators' ability to remain emotionally stable and display professionalism is grounded in their ability to engage in ongoing self-care practices while managing the demands of the classroom. A trauma-informed approach integrates practices that support student and teacher awareness of emotional triggers. These triggers contribute to escalated interactions, but a trauma-informed approach creates proactive measures for addressing these experiences before, during, and after they have occurred—with the ultimate goal of creating a physically and psychologically safe classroom for everyone.

## Creating and Maintaining Safety in the Classroom

A trauma-informed approach in the classroom is rooted in a safe environment. While safety encompasses ensuring the physical wellbeing of students, it also extends to ensuring that psychological safety is bolstered through creating a predictable classroom environment where every member feels respected, validated, and heard. Experiences in the classroom from the outset of the school year shape whether or not both teachers and students feel psychologically safe. A classroom structure promoting psychological safety reflects clear expectations for behavior, a defined process for addressing behavioral concerns that students understand, and mechanisms for helping students communicate about experiences that undermine feelings of safety.

The messages communicated by teachers, verbally and nonverbally, about expectations that each member contributes to a psychologically safe environment provide the foundation for a trauma-informed classroom structure. At the outset of the school year teachers can clearly outline the expectations for a bully-free class, students expressing frustration and anger verbally in a respectful manner, and displaying supportive behaviors for other

## 6 SELF-CARE STRATEGIES

Self-care strategies to prevent STS symptoms include:

- Prioritizing taking care of your physical body with adequate sleep and sustaining nutrition
- Taking breaks both with vacation and mini-breaks throughout the day such as a quiet non-work related moment during a planning period.
- Connecting with supportive individuals in your life to engage in non-work related activities
- Rewarding yourself periodically throughout the day with a favorite TV show, snack, or something else desirable.
- Avoiding excessive alcohol intake
- Engaging in mindfulness and self-awareness activities
- Exercising multiple times during the week



students. These are key additions to general class rules. Specifically, acknowledging progress for displaying supportive behavior, such as a student refraining from teasing another student when obviously tempted, helps create a classroom culture focused on promoting psychological safety. Psychological safety is further reinforced when teachers model respectful interactions with students through verbal and nonverbal behavior that is predictable and has the goal of addressing behavior concerns in a firm but caring manner.

To bolster a safe classroom environment, teachers should communicate effectively during unexpected situations that potentially trigger youths to display traumatic-stress reactions. Transitions during the school day represent one of the most unsettling situations that potentially result in unexpected reactions from students and teachers. Preparing students for changes in lesson tasks, seating arrangements, the end of a class period, and a host of other transitions can improve predictability in the classroom, especially when providing verbal announcements that transitions will occur soon and outlining behavioral expectations. Developing and posting agendas for the class period further bolsters a sense of predictability that can counter the adverse impact of transitions. When behavior disruptions occur during the class period that threaten students' sense of safety, having an emotionally neutral response that communicates the boundaries for behavior and

allowing the students to understand that your disapproval is with what the students have done and not with who the student is as a person, reinforces a classroom culture of safety. Each of these components for creating a safe classroom is discussed in greater detail below.

## Assessing Need

Providing a trauma-informed environment in the classroom begins with identifying the level of need among students and creating a system for using this information to develop a more psychologically safe environment. This process is best implemented through the introduction of a formal screening process for students at risk for trauma exposure. Screening for trauma can occur universally or through a targeted process that identifies students displaying dysregulated or disruptive behaviors. Trauma-informed screening tools vary but generally identify one or more of the three E's: Events, Experiences, and Effects.<sup>11</sup> *Events* refer to exposure to traumatic events. Screening tools focusing on events often ask respondents to share whether or not they have witnessed or been impacted by specific traumatic events such as sexual abuse or a natural disaster. *Experiences* refer to the traumatic stress reactions that youths may display in response to exposure to traumatic events. *Effects* represent the degree to which traumatic stress reactions have impacted youths' functioning in key areas such as school, work, and relationships. A comprehensive list of screening tools is provided by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network.<sup>12</sup> Screening tools should align with school needs and lead to a more formal trauma assessment and services when indicated.

While the availability of formal screening and assessment tools is a necessary component of a trauma-informed school, teachers can support the process for identifying need in a trauma-informed manner when these formal processes are not implemented school-wide. A primary distinction between trauma-informed approaches versus traditional approaches for behavioral dysregulation is first inquiring, "what happened to him/her that led to this behavior," versus stating, "s/he is such a bad kid and needs punishment."

Within the classroom, this shift in perspective can be facilitated by providing opportunities for students to explain reasons for their behavior, identifying triggers that preceded their behavior, or requesting help without criticism prior to showing disruptive behavior. Classrooms that have social-emotional resources such as feelings posters and clearly written expectations and protocols to follow when a student feels s/he is becoming out of control emotionally can embed self-identification of trauma triggers/reminders into the classroom, which facilitate early identification of need. A primary barrier to youths self-identifying need is the feeling that it is not emotionally safe to share the life events or triggers that are driving anger, sadness, and a host of other feelings that can lead to disruptive behavior. To address this barrier, classroom environments should be safe and foster meaningful connections.

## **Building Opportunities for Meaningful Connection**

Reactions to trauma can disrupt healthy connections by distorting perceptions of self and others. These distortions can lead to classroom arguments, resistance to engage in class activities, or simply increased tension between teachers and students. These distortions are best countered by creating opportunities to connect with students in a manner that acknowledges the difficulties that drive mistrust of others while also guiding students to express themselves in a healthy manner.

The foundation for facilitating meaningful trauma-informed connections is striving for authentic interactions that convey respect for students' perspectives. Students who have experienced trauma can feel disempowered and strive to regain power in behaviorally disruptive ways when perceiving threat or unfairness from others—particularly authority figures. Modeling respectful communication provides a powerful tool for students to reference when unsure about how to respond to situations. This form of communication can include reprimanding or providing guidance without embarrassing or humiliating students, acknowledging when students feel slighted or treated unfairly, and asking for clarification

or repeating back what was heard when students are expressing frustration in an oppositional or unclear manner. When possible, providing opportunities for students to choose between two options after feeling threatened or possibly experiencing a trauma reminder can help youths re-engage the part of their brains responsible for decision making and reduce the control of the emotional part that is focused solely on survival. These interactions help students feel less on-guard because they feel the teacher understands them and will treat them fairly.



Maintaining meaningful connections involves creating routines that promote healthy coping strategies and improved self-regulation skills and integrating them into class expectations, rules, and lessons. Beginning class with a brief breathing or mindfulness exercise, creating a safe zone in the classroom for dysregulated students to take a few moments to collect themselves, or integrating stories into lessons about individuals who reflect the students' culture and manage stress in a healthy manner can provide constant support for building healthy connections in the classroom.<sup>13</sup> Reinforcing these behaviors by acknowledging students who attempt to make healthy connections with others or regulating their behavior is critical and sustains an environment rich with meaningful connections. Often when students who have experienced multiple traumas are simply

present in the classroom, it is a testament to their resilience. Using a strengths-based approach to connect with students by recognizing that the students are working to manage their life situations as best they know how, creates a safe space for the students to embrace new strategies to approach challenges inside and outside the classroom.

Each of these interactions reflects a fundamental principle for a trauma-informed approach in the classroom, which is to focus on helping students feel safe in relationships. Given that increased levels of victimization have been linked to greater delinquent behavior, it becomes clear that youths who are displaying traumatic stress reactions, as a result of interpersonal traumas, are using their distrust of others and hyper-responsiveness to perceived threat for protection.<sup>14</sup> By building meaningful connections in the classroom, teachers can help students read situations more accurately and manage stressful situations more skillfully—creating a safer classroom for all.

## **Integrating Trauma-Informed Discipline**

Ensuring physical and psychological safety in the classroom for all students while striving to cultivate a rich academic environment presents one of the chief challenges when students are displaying traumatic stress reactions. Effective trauma-informed discipline practices accomplish the goal of maintaining safety for all students when they are applied consistently, explained clearly, and used to help students learn healthy alternatives to traumatic stress reactions. Effective discipline begins with expectation setting and consistent reinforcement of expected behaviors. This foundational principle aligns with a positive behavioral intervention and supports (PBIS) framework for managing behavior. Its effectiveness at countering behavior related to traumatic stress reactions lies in establishing that the primary goal of classroom behavior management is for students to succeed at self-regulating their behavior. Trauma can make a student feel powerless and cause hypersensitivity to threat, such as a teacher correcting him or a belief that the teacher

feels the student is a bad person who deserves only punishment. Changing that perception involves intentional acknowledgment when students are behaving as expected, such as expressing pride in a student for staying quiet or asking for a bathroom break when he is starting to become upset. Although these behaviors are generally perceived as expected of a child and do not deserve a reward, students who have experienced trauma often have distorted perspectives about appropriate behavior. Positive reinforcement for the most basic healthy behaviors can ensure that classroom expectations for behavior are clearly understood and give students a much needed incentive to continue displaying self-control.

The continuum of trauma-informed discipline extends to the practices used to prepare students for discipline and manage crisis situations. Preparation for discipline involves ensuring that students understand the positive and negative consequences for their behavior. This preparation can be accomplished by giving students concrete warnings about behavior, posting class rules, using a neutral tone to inform students about the specific consequences for their behavior, and providing specific directions for the expected behavior. These preparatory actions can reduce the impact of trauma reminders and triggers on escalating behaviors by appealing to students' need to feel safe and creating structure to guide behavior. When students enter crisis mode and display aggressive or highly dysregulated behavior, the priority for the educator is maintaining physical safety for the student and others in the classroom. Trauma-informed approaches employ predictable protocols that minimize escalation of behavior by facilitating separation of dysregulated students from triggering situations and focusing primarily on behavioral stabilization. Specifically, trauma-informed crisis-management helps avoid matching students' aggression, resists taking actions personally, and clearly and neutrally communicates the action steps that will be taken to ensure safety (i.e., "I am going to take you outside the room now because you do not seem ready to talk about the issue").

When determining behavioral consequences, it is important to identify the reason the behavior occurred and use this reason as a

## 7 TRAUMA-INFORMED DISCIPLINE

Trauma-informed discipline involves acknowledging the role trauma may have in behavior and identifying practices that will provide appropriate consequences while promoting healthier behavior in the future. Examples include:

- Disciplinary practices involve more than simply isolating students from peers.
- Disciplinary infractions are handled in a timely manner that is consistent with the standards outlined by the school.
- Restorative solutions (e.g., restorative circles) are employed to foster a positive and communicative school environment.
- Signs outlining school rules or expectations are posted throughout the school to remind students to be safe, respectful, and responsible.
- There is a designated room or space where students are sent to after disruptive outbursts to clear their heads and reflect on their recent behavior (reflection room).

guide. The ultimate goal for discipline is to ensure youths choose a better set of actions to reach their desired goal in the future or self-regulate to delay achieving that goal. While this can partially be achieved using punitive measures that make it clear that the behavior is unacceptable, punitive measures alone fall short of teaching a new way to manage a situation. Behavior dysregulation related to trauma is often reactive to situations that are triggering or misread as opposed to dysregulation that is calculated and callous with the intent of harming others. The former benefits from opportunities to develop skills to control impulses, repair damage caused by reactive response, and develop empathy and healthy coping strategies. Restorative justice practices are particularly helpful at providing opportunities to help youths who have experienced trauma better understand the impact of their actions on others and strive to learn new skills to manage similar situations in the future. Trauma sometimes distorts youths' ability to understand the impact of their behavior on others or fully understand that their punishment is related to the behavior that was displayed. Coupled with restorative justice practices, effective discipline clearly connects the consequences with the specific behavior that warranted correcting. These strategies also help establish a safe environment for all involved parties by using both punishment and positive behavioral interventions to promote healthier behavior in the future (see *Sidebar 7, Trauma-informed Discipline*).<sup>15</sup>

## From Theory to Practice: Trauma-Informed Practices in Baltimore City Public Schools

Baltimore City Public Schools have recognized the importance of providing school-based mental health and behavioral services for all students to promote school success. Baltimore is the 26th largest city in the U.S. and one of the poorest jurisdictions in Maryland, with 22% of people living below the poverty level vs. 9% in the state of Maryland ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)). Baltimore City has consistently had one of the highest murder rates in the nation (Rector, 2016). In April 2015, Baltimore City experienced civil unrest following the

death of 25-year-old Freddie Gray Jr. after having sustained injuries while being transported in a police vehicle. The civil unrest resulted in riots that rocked already fragile communities. Baltimore City Schools recognized the need to respond to students and school communities who were not only traumatized by civil unrest but those who experience other types of chronic trauma and stress.



## Integrating Trauma-Informed Care and developing Trauma-Responsive Classrooms and Schools

Baltimore City Schools recognize that without appropriate supports and services, students who have experienced chronic stress and trauma are often unavailable to learn because their brains and bodies have been hijacked by that trauma. City Schools applied and were selected to receive the U.S. Department of Education's Promoting Student Resilience Grant to support the development of trauma-responsive schools. Through this grant, City Schools have developed a three-tiered intervention model to provide prevention and intervention supports at the school-based level. Services and supports will be implemented initially in the 13 focus schools that were most impacted by the civil unrest and then expanded to the rest of the district.

### 7 TRAUMA-INFORMED DISCIPLINE

Examples include:

- Teachers and other faculty model appropriate behavior and positive relationships for students.
- Students know the consequences and rewards for behavior.
- Behaviors that are associated with consequences and rewards are operationally defined.
- Disciplinary actions are applied consistently to all students for the same behavior.
- Positive behavior and student accomplishments recognized by teachers are communicated to parents promptly and consistently.
- All staff provide targeted instruction regarding expectations for behavior.
- Disproportionality is addressed by engaging relevant stakeholders and experts in the community.
- Students are able to call restorative circles when they feel they have a problem, even prior to an outright disciplinary infraction.

## 7 TRAUMA-INFORMED DISCIPLINE

Examples include:

- The use of affective statements, or emotion-descriptive language, is encouraged for both teachers and students to foster positive relationships, either verbally or in writing.
- Discipline practices are sensitive to behaviors that may be deemed appropriate at home despite being discouraged at school.

### **TIER 1: UNIVERSAL/PREVENTION SERVICES FOR ALL STUDENTS**

Training for principals and their executive leadership on creating trauma-responsive schools is scheduled for each month for the entire 2016-2017 school year. Through a SAMHSA partnership, reoccurring after-school classes have been developed for school-based staff. These classes incorporate SAMSHA's Model of Trauma-Informed Approach: Key Assumptions and Principles. After-school classes are also being developed for school principals and assistant principals to develop a systemic application of a flexible framework to create trauma-sensitive schools. Additionally, City Schools will be integrating school-based training-coaching-modeling in the 13 focus schools on the use of Restorative Practices, Mindfulness and the utilization of Kognito, which is an online and interactive suicide prevention program.

### **TIER 2: EARLY INTERVENTION FOR SOME STUDENTS**

In addition to the existing mental health supports assigned to the school, the grant will provide each of the 13 focus schools with a full-time expanded mental health clinician whose primary focus is to identify students affected by trauma and provide school-based, trauma-focused mental health services. These clinicians will provide screening questionnaires to identify students impacted by trauma.

### **TIER 3: INTENSIVE INTERVENTION FOR FEW STUDENTS**

The expanded mental health and school-based clinicians at these 13 Focus schools will receive training in the evidenced-based psychosocial treatment for children and adolescents experiencing significant emotional or behavioral problems related to exposure to traumatic live events. TF-CBT, when conducted to high fidelity, has been found to reduce posttraumatic stress symptoms as well as depression, anxiety, and behavior problems. School-based clinicians will also collaborate with specific community-based mental health providers who specialize in treating trauma when necessary (i.e. lack of parent consent or refusal for treatment or nature of the trauma).

## The Breakthrough Series Collaborative

Three Baltimore City Public School programs participated in a year-long Breakthrough Series that was collaboratively developed by the University of Maryland, Baltimore Schools of Medicine and Social Work, The Family Center at the Kennedy Krieger Institute, and The Zanvyl and Isabelle Krieger Fund. The focus of this collaborative was to support Baltimore in becoming a more trauma-informed, resilient city. The participating ED PRIDE programs, a specialized city-wide program for students receiving special education for emotional disabilities, completed self-assessments to determine their baseline levels of school-based trauma-responsive practices. The teams then reviewed their self-assessment reports, identified target areas in need of improvement, and developed team goals. The teams developed and implemented Plan-Do-Study-Adjust strategies to achieve their team goals and increase the quantity and quality of trauma-responsive practices.

The teams developed and implemented four Plan-Do-Study-Adjust strategies in the ED PRIDE program. The ED PRIDE program is designed to help students manage their emotional disabilities by providing comprehensive services in a structured environment to increase pro-social behavior and coping strategies to regulate emotional and behavioral responses while engaging in the curriculum. The ED PRIDE program includes the use of Response to Intervention (RTI), the use of uniform points and level system, access to a support room, crisis intervention, and physical restraint as a last option and when the student is an imminent danger to self or others. The four PDSAs are described below.



## Gauging the Emotional Climate in the Classroom

Three ED PRIDE programs implemented a morning check-in strategy that was titled, “Gauging the Emotional Temperature in the Classroom,” which was derived from Mariale Hardiman’s, *Brain Targeted Teaching Model for 21st Century Schools: Brain Target One: Establishing the Emotional Climate for Learning*. This strategy was selected as a trauma-responsive intervention to support students who are growing up in a toxic stress environment and who routinely start off the day in distress from experiences such as altercations at home, community violence, exposure to drugs and alcohol abuse, pervasive poverty, inadequate housing, or restricted access to food. This was selected as a trauma-responsive intervention because the goal was to support students in identifying their emotional state when entering school rather than allowing them to continue without the support they need to be emotionally and cognitively present at school. Each ED PRIDE program created a developmentally appropriate worksheet that asked the students to identify how they were feeling and why, and if additional support was needed for them to modulate their emotions and behaviors. The students and staff reported that this strategy was helpful in creating a ritual in which the students routinely practice identifying and expressing feeling states, cause and effect in relation

to those feeling states (I feel angry because I got into a fight with my brother), building a positive relationship with the PRIDE staff members, and accessing adult support when needed. There were less staff referrals for students in need of support in the classes where developmentally appropriate worksheets were implemented.

For more information on the Breakthrough Series Collaborative, please visit: <http://thrivebmore.org/baltimore-breakthrough-series-collaborative/>.

## Project Mickey

Project Mickey is part of Jasmine’s House, Inc. whose goal is to end animal neglect, cruelty, and abuse. The animals in Project Mickey are trained therapy animals recruited from shelters, and many have experienced significant trauma. Project Mickey staff brought the animals to the ED PRIDE program and provided specific goal-focused sessions with the students. Project Mickey was selected as a trauma-responsive strategy because the program provides fun, animal-centered activities, lessons on animal needs, and communication and training for students to strengthen their emotional vocabulary and increase their ability to recognize and express feelings. The program also provided opportunities for students to experience and demonstrate empathy around the animals’ traumatic history and their own traumatic events and to help build student resilience through the animals’ progress and healing.

The scope and sequence of the sessions are as follows:

- Safety
- Identifying Feelings from Non-Verbal Communication
- Pet Needs
- Abuse and Neglect
- Shelters and Rescues
- Pit Bulls
- Helping
- Optional:
  - Community Cats
  - Working Dogs
  - Training using Positive Reinforcement

In order to participate in Project Mickey, students had to meet clearly identified behavioral expectations that resulted from earning a specified amount of points (based on a points system). There were 16 participants in one of the Elementary School ED PRIDE programs. Four of those students met the behavioral expectations at baseline and maintained the expected point level to participate, and 11 students demonstrated an increase in their average earned points and were able to participate. Additionally, the impact of Project Mickey on student attendance was assessed, and 10 of the 16 students who participated demonstrated an increase in attendance during this intervention.

For additional information on Project Mickey, please visit <http://jasmineshouse.org/project-mickey/>.

## Have You Filled a Bucket?

This intervention was implemented in another Elementary/Middle ED PRIDE program at and was based on the book, *Have You Filled a Bucket?* by Carol McCloud. The bucket in the book represents a student's mental and emotional self. A full bucket indicates that a student feels happier, more confident, secure, calm, patient, and friendly. Students learn that when they think, do, and say positive things, they not only fill their bucket, but they fill the buckets of people around them. Students learned real-world examples of being bucket fillers and bucket dippers.

This intervention was selected as a trauma-informed prevention strategy, supporting the development of behavioral and emotional regulation and empathy building. The book was read to the students and they were taught real world examples of being bucket fillers and dippers. Students' abilities to provide authentic peer compliments and praise using sentence starters were assessed before implementing this strategy. The goal was to increase positive peer interactions by increasing students' ability to provide authentic and meaningful praise and compliments (e.g., "I like the way you helped me clean up the papers I dropped. It made me happy.") to their peers which were linked to feeling states. After this intervention, 10 out of the 12 student participants increased their ability to provide

authentic peer praise and compliments that resulted in an increase in positive connections in the classroom.

For additional information on Have You Filled a Bucket, please visit <http://www.bucketfillers101.com/>.



## Mindfulness

The clinicians and teachers at a Middle School ED PRIDE program implemented a Mindful Moment in one of their classrooms. The purpose of this intervention was to teach students to quiet the brain and body in order to increase their ability to self-calm and regulate emotions and behaviors. Many of the students were growing up in toxic stress environments without the chance for their brains to experience quiet and calm. The Mindful Moment focused on teaching these students how to quiet the brain and body in brief, incremental sessions. Students also learned that they have the capacity to switch off the stimulus and that their ability to do so resides within them and they can take it with them anywhere they go. Another goal of this intervention was to support emotional and behavioral regulation. Viktor Frankl stated, “Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” Students growing up in toxic stress frequently react out of survival mode and these reactions include fight, flight, or flee. Over time, using mindfulness helps students create new neural pathways by helping them to learn how to develop the ability to choose their

responses rather than instinctively react. To assess the Mindful Moment intervention, staff utilized a self-response tool completed by the students at the end of each session. The survey included the following questions:

*How do I feel now? (identify a feeling word). How much? (from 0-5)*

The following questions asked the students to rate from 1 (No) to 5 (Yes):

*Did I demonstrate my best effort today by holding myself to a high standard?*

*Do I feel more mindful?*

*Do I feel calmer?*

*What strategy will I use in class?*

*How will that strategy help me?*

*Is there anything else I want to remember from today's session?*

Mindful Schools Curriculum is currently in the pilot phase in six of the ED PRIDE programs and will be collecting baseline and post data to measure effectiveness.

For more information on the Mindful Schools Curriculum, please visit <http://www.mindfulschools.org/>.

## Conclusion

Trauma-informed classrooms are an essential ingredient for building schools with safe academic environments for students to maximize learning. Providing educators with the tools to understand the impact of trauma on students' behavior and academic performance lays the foundation for transforming the classroom into a safe space for academic engagement. Integrating resources that facilitate clearly defined expectations about behavior and safety encourages healthy connections with others and provides discipline that promotes self-regulation skills, and sustains trauma-informed approaches in the classroom.



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