

Trauma-Informed Teaching

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It is estimated that childhood trauma has affected over half of the US population. Students with disabilities, students of color, poor students, LGBTQ+ students, and students from immigrant or non-English-speaking homes—and particularly students with multiple marginalized identities—are more likely to have experienced more traumatic experiences, and to have adverse outcomes from trauma. In order to create an equitable learning experience for all, teachers and other school staff must be trauma literate and actively build trauma-informed spaces for these students to learn.

This session will address the prevalence and demographic distribution of ACEs (adverse childhood experiences) in the US population. It will present an overview of the impacts of trauma on the brain, particularly with regards to learning and socialization, and how these might manifest in the classroom. The remainder of the session will be dedicated to discussing strategies for creating trauma-informed classroom spaces and routines, wrapping up with setting goals for trauma-informed teaching.

This session is targeted at teachers and creating trauma-informed classrooms, but other school personnel will also find it useful.

Session Objectives:

- Be aware of the prevalence of trauma in K-12 students
- Recognize the demographic differences in trauma
- Understand the effects of trauma on the brain, and how these manifest in the classroom
- Gain a toolset of strategies for supporting students with trauma
- Develop a concrete plan for implementing a trauma-informed practice in your classroom or school

Strategies for Trauma-Informed Teaching

Break the cycle!

Foster a sense of safety → enable thinking & learning

Below is a (non-exhaustive) summary of instructional strategies drawn from Cole et al. (2005), Davidson (2017), Gay (2002), Perkins and Graham-Bermann (2012), Perry (2006), and Wilson (2020).

Physical safety

- Maximize transparency
- Maintain routine, consistency, and predictability; give students notice prior to major transitions or changes in routine
- Provide clear information and instructions; lay out explicit goals, expectations, rules, and boundaries

Social & emotional safety

- Meet students where they're at; use culturally responsive pedagogy
- Build a cooperative community atmosphere
- Give students choice where possible, and inform them about their options
- Ask for student input, engage in dialogue, and give students leadership opportunities
- Help students build self-regulatory, social, communication, and other skills
- Approach students with curiosity and compassion

Intellectual safety

- Encourage questions and mistakes
- Avoid imposing time constraints for performance (e.g., tests); reduce pressure of getting "the" right answer
- Foster a growth mindset
- Give students time for reappraisal before or reflection after a test
- Assume each student is a capable learner and treat them as such
- Provide positive and constructive feedback; identify students' strengths and successes to foster self-efficacy

N.B.: Behavioral "problems" are usually a sign that something is wrong / isn't working

Goal-Setting

1. Analyze your current classroom practices through a trauma-informed lens. In what areas is your class supportive of students with trauma? In what ways might it be challenging?
2. Identify **one** change you can make in your classroom right away or soon. Use the SMART goal outline to make a concrete plan.

S	M	A	R	T
				
SPECIFIC	MEASURABLE	ATTAINABLE	RELEVANT	TIME-BASED
Make your goals specific and narrow for more effective planning.	Define what evidence will prove you're making progress and reevaluate when necessary.	Make sure you can reasonably accomplish your goal within a certain time frame.	Your goals should align with your values and long-term objectives.	Set a realistic ambitious end-date for task prioritisation and motivation.

Image from <https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/manage-team-performance/0/steps/359276>

S	M	A	R	T

Citations & Suggested Reading

1. Cole, S. F., et al. (2005). [*Helping Traumatized Children Learn: A Report and Policy Agenda*](#). Massachusetts Advocates for Children.
2. Davidson, S. (2017). [*Trauma-Informed Practices for Postsecondary Education: A Guide*](#). Education Northwest.
3. Felitti, V. J., et al. (1998). "Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.
4. Gay, G. (2002). "Preparing for Culturally Responsive Teaching." *Journal of Teacher Education*.
5. Perkins, S., & Graham-Bermann, S. (2012). "Violence Exposure and the Development of School-Related Functioning." *Aggression and Violent Behavior*.
6. Perry, B. D. (2006). "Fear and learning: Trauma-related factors in the adult education process." *New Directions for Adult & Continuing Education*.
7. Swedo, E. A., et al. (2023). "[Prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences Among U.S. Adults—Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2011–2020](#)." *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*.
8. Van der Kolk, B. A. (2015). *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, mind and body in the healing of trauma*.
9. Wilson, V. (2020). "Trauma-informed teaching of adults." *Fine Print*.