Trauma Sensitive Approaches for Home & School
Video 1 Fact Sheet: Understanding Trauma

VTSS — Virginia Tiered Systems of Supports

FORMED FAMILIES FORWARD

What is Trauma?

Trauma refers to experiences that cause intense physical and psychological reactions to stress.

It can refer to a single event, multiple events, or a set of circumstances that are physically and/or emotionally harmful or potentially harmful and result in lasting adverse effects on an individual's physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. *1

What is Traumatic Stress?

Child traumatic stress includes reactions resulting from exposure to one or more traumas over the life course. These reactions persist and affect a child's daily life even after the events have ended. The stress experience may overwhelm a child's ability to cope with daily demands. Responses and symptoms vary but may be more evident when the child is reminded in some way of the traumatic event(s). *2

Causes/Kinds of Trauma

- Natural disasters
- Sexual abuse
- Physical abuse
- Domestic violence
- School violence
- Neglect and deprivation
- Traumatic grief
- Accidents
- Medical injury, illness, or procedures
- Loss of a parent/caregiver
- Exposure to community violence or terrorism

Instead of asking "What's wrong with you?", a more constructive question is "What's happened to you?"

Types of Trauma

Acute, Chronic, Complex, Systemic, System Induced

Signs of Trauma

Reactions to trauma can include a variety of responses, signs, or symptoms, including: *3

- Loss of appetite or overeating
- Unexplained irritability or anger
- School avoidance
- Fixation on certain events
- Problems focusing on projects, schoolwork, and conversations
- Regression or loss of skills
- Too much or too little sleep; nightmares
- High levels of worry, trouble with change, or a high level of feeling unsafe
- Angry outbursts, high levels of emotions, or poor focus
- Disruptive, disrespectful, sullen, withdrawn, avoidant, or anxious behaviors
- Physical symptoms, such as aches and pains
- Problems relating to others or forming attachments
- Older children may abuse drugs or alcohol and behave in risky ways

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

The initial ACE study, by the Centers for Disease Control and Kaiser Permanente, identified an association between 10 experiences of childhood maltreatment and later problems with adult health and well-being. The study uses the ACE score, a total count of the number of adverse childhood experiences reported by respondents, to assess the total amount of stress during childhood. The greater the number of ACEs, the greater the risk for the following problems later in life including alcoholism, depression, multiple sexual partners, suicide attempts, smoking and liver disease among other negative health related issues.

Ultimately, this study showed the direct link between childhood trauma and poor health outcomes in adulthood.

ACEs are important because they trigger the fight, flight, or freeze response, which can lead to negative internalizing emotions and externalizing behaviors. The 10 ACEs defined by the study are:

- Physical abuse
- Sexual abuse
- Verbal abuse
- Physical neglect
- Emotional neglect
- Losing a parent to divorce, separation, or other reason
- Witnessing a mother abused
- A family member who is:
  – Depressed or diagnosed with another mental illness
  – Addicted to alcohol or another substance
  – In prison

Trauma's Impact on School

When children who experience trauma and traumatic stress operate in a fight, flight, or freeze mode, they may have trouble meeting the demands of school. Teachers and other school staff may see big, acting-out behaviors. Some children may 'fly under the radar' and use avoidant behaviors. Each child's response to trauma is unique. Educators should look behind the behaviors to determine the student's needs.

*1 Cite: US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.
*2 Cite: National Child Traumatic Stress Network. Note: Traumatic stress is a common term for reactive anxiety and depression, although it is not a medical term and is not included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM).
*3 Note: Signs of trauma may mimic characteristics of depression or anxiety. Clinical evaluation may be necessary to determine if other diagnosable mental health conditions exist.

Videos are available at www.FormedFamiliesForward.org.

Trauma Sensitive Approaches for Home & School
Video 2 Fact Sheet: Responding to Trauma

How Trauma Impacts Learning

Children and youth who have experienced trauma are often preoccupied with their physical, emotional and psychological safety. They may also have deficits in processing social cues and identifying their feelings in socially appropriate ways. Trauma can limit a child's ability to:

- Complete tasks
- Organize, understand, and remember information
- Concentrate and sustain attention
- Manage attention, emotions, and behavior
- Shift and transition to new activities and demands

ARC Framework for Addressing Trauma Impact *1

Attachment: Building a trusting relationship between a child or youth and caring adult

Self-Regulation: Identifying emotions and learning how to express and cope with them

Competency: Strengthening resilience by building skills to help children and youth cope with trauma and change

Fostering Self Regulation *2

Children learn to cope with the challenges of life by practicing the skill of self-regulation through failures and successes. Students need guidance in learning how to regulate emotions and behaviors, and opportunities for practicing self-regulation. Adults can support development of self-regulation skills over time:

- Use affective statements (for example, using "I" messages) to identify the cause and effect relationship between their actions and the impact on their relationships with others.
- Focus on consistency and reciprocity to help build strong relationships.
- Assist children and youth in learning to identify their emotions and manage their behaviors.
- Teach strategies for coping with stress and strong emotions.
- Partner with children and youth to solve behavioral issues. Listening to their ideas helps them feel empowered.
- Watch for your own triggers!
- Empower children and youth to develop resiliency; increase opportunities for choice and building decision making skills.
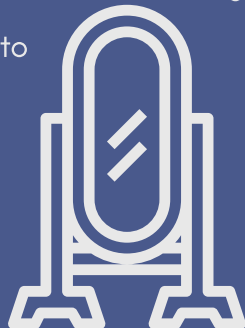
Look Behind the Behaviors

Often adults observe confusing and concerning behaviors in children and youth who have experienced trauma or traumatic stress. These behaviors may not seem logical or proportional to the situation. It is really important to consider the function of the behaviors.

Ask: What is the child trying to gain or avoid? What is the underlying need? Your response matters!

Building Connections Prevents Problems

When presented with challenging tasks and transition, a child or youth may respond with disruptive, disrespectful or disengaged behaviors. A child's trauma history may interfere with his or her ability to meet expectations at home and school, and create obstacles in relationship development.

Creating a strong relationship of trust and respect can ease anxieties, convene a sense of safety and prevent small concerns from turning into big behavior problems. Adults can take simple actions to build attachments, strengthen relationships, and prevent problems:

- Make positive and specific acknowledgement
- Use active listening and reciprocity in conversation
- Follow through with your word and promises
- Establish clear and reasonable expectations and consequences
- Apply a compassionate understanding of a child's strengths and deficits

Strategies

- Look at the need behind the behavior
- The approach must be clear, consistent, reinforced, and promote a sense of safety
- Focusing on relationships is essential
- Listening to students builds relationships
- Naming emotions helps in understanding and managing them

> When a child's behavior is saying "I won't," he or she may mean "I can't."

*1 Cite: Blaustein & Kinniburgh
*2 Resources: Childmind.org; ARCframework.org

Videos are available at www.FormedFamiliesForward.org.

Schools using multi-tiered systems of supports (ex.: Virginia Tiered Systems of Supports/VTSS) recognize the importance of strengthening academic, social-emotional, and behavioral skills, so that children and youth are ready to meet high expectations at school, at home and in the community.

Academic
Social Emotional
Behavioral

What is Social-Emotional Competence? *1

There are five core skills critical to a child's social emotional growth:

- **Self-awareness** – the ability to recognize your emotions and understand the link between thoughts, emotions and behaviors
- **Self-management** – the ability to regulate one's emotions, thoughts and behaviors
- **Social awareness** – the ability to understand other's perspectives and demonstrate empathy.
- **Relationship skills** – the ability to build and maintain healthy relationships
- **Responsible decision making** – the ability to make positive choice in behavior and interactions with others

Core Trauma-Informed Care Values *2

- **Safety** – Ensuring physical, emotional, behavioral and academic safety. Remember a student's perception of safety is what matters to them. Predictability and routine can contribute to a sense of safety.
- **Trustworthiness** – Conveying honesty and truthfulness. Examples of adults behaviors that show trustworthiness to students include being reliable and consistent, making tasks clear, and maintaining appropriate boundaries. Everyone must be treated with dignity and respect.
- **Choice** – Maximizing student and family choice. Student choices and a sense of control. For persons impacted by trauma who have lost control, having even small choices can feel reassuring and empowering. At school, opportunities for choice and shared decision-making can be integrated into academic and non-academic activities.
- **Collaboration** – Partnering of adults and students to solve problems and share power. Educators can help students and families be aware of and take opportunities to collaborate. Collaboration between school staff is especially critical in trauma-sensitive schools.
- **Empowerment** – Ensuring students recognize they are capable of change and they have opportunities to practice and be acknowledged for using problem solving skills. Schools empower by meaningfully including families and students in decision-making; adopting a strengths-based perspective that recognizes capabilities of all students; and embedding skill development throughout the school day.

School/Family Collaboration is Key

- Share positive information with each other, in addition to concerns/problems
- Focus on child and family strengths
- Meaningfully engage families in school decision-making
- Open communication
- Listen to families; Build trust
- Keep all communications respectful and child-focused
- Reserve judgment re: parenting or teaching approaches

Social Emotional Competencies Can Help Children *3

Social emotional competencies help children:

- Persist during challenging tasks
- Ask for help when needed
- Consider the consequences of their actions

Children who are taught social-emotional skills experience greater educational, career and relationship success.

Strategies

- Consider needed social, emotional, behavioral and academic supports
- Establish feelings of safety to support relationships
- Show genuine interest to build trust and strengthen relationships
- Maintain trust to support learning and understanding
- Let emotions calm before engaging the student
- Give choice in the school day to support empowerment
- Give voice and choice to promote trust and empowerment
- Foster open communication between home and school
- Build on student strengths
- Offer supports to families to build resiliency

Restorative Practices *4

Restorative practices promotes inclusiveness, relationship-building, and problem-solving through the use of circles for teaching conflict resolution. In contrast to traditional, reactive punishments which rarely teach new skills, schools using restorative practices encourage students to reflect on and take responsibility for their actions and take steps to repair and harm they may have caused. Restorative practices help students and teachers develop stronger relationships through a deeper sense of understanding and empathy for one another.

*1 Cite: CASEL.org
*2 Cites: Fallot & Harris (2009); Daniel & Black, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2017)
*3 Cite: CASEL.org
*4 Cite: NEA/AFT Restorative Practices Working Group, 2014

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