

Developing a Trauma-Informed Perspective in School Communities

An Introduction for Educators, School Counselors,
and Administrators

Lynn Heramis



Bassim Hamadeh, CEO and Publisher
Amy Smith, Project Editor
Emely Villavicencio, Senior Graphic Designer
Stephanie Kohl, Licensing Associate
Natalie Piccotti, Director of Marketing
Kassie Graves, Vice President of Editorial
Jamie Giganti, Director of Academic Publishing

Copyright © 2020 by Lynn Heramis. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reprinted, reproduced, transmitted, or utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying, microfilming, and recording, or in any information retrieval system without the written permission of Cognella, Inc. For inquiries regarding permissions, translations, foreign rights, audio rights, and any other forms of reproduction, please contact the Cognella Licensing Department at rights@cognella.com.

Trademark Notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Cover image copyright © 2019 iStockphoto LP/wildpixel.

Printed in the United States of America.

Brief Contents

Preface.....	xi
Chapter 1 The Need for Trauma-Informed Schools.....	1
Chapter 2 The Developing Brain	17
Chapter 3 Attachment Patterns.....	31
Chapter 4 Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).....	55
Chapter 5 Recognizing Trauma Responses.....	73
Chapter 6 Healing Through Safety.....	93
Chapter 7 Developing Trauma-Informed Approaches in Schools	109
References.....	131
Index	139

Detailed Contents

Preface.....	xi
Chapter 1: The Need for Trauma-Informed Schools.....	1
Zero Tolerance Policies.....	2
Trauma-Informed Schools in Action.....	4
Introduction to Trauma.....	6
Practice #1.....	8
Trauma-Informed Approach.....	9
Behavior Is Communication.....	10
Practice #2.....	13
Chapter Summary.....	14
Extended Learning.....	15
Chapter 2: The Developing Brain.....	17
Basic Brain Functions.....	17
Prefrontal Cortex.....	18
Amygdala.....	18
Hippocampus.....	20
Fight, Flight, Freeze.....	20
Other Functions Affected by Trauma.....	21
The Stress Response System.....	22
Neuroplasticity.....	24
Practice #1.....	25
Mirror Neurons.....	25
Chapter Summary.....	29
Extended Learning.....	30
Chapter 3: Attachment Patterns.....	31
Strange Situation.....	32
Secure Attachment.....	33
Insecure Attachment.....	35
Avoidant.....	35
Anxious/Ambivalent.....	36
Disorganized/Disoriented.....	36
Reactive Attachment.....	37
Complex Trauma.....	37
Attachment in Schools.....	38

Quality of Teacher–Student Relationships	41
Social Environments	42
Practice #1	43
Shame	44
Practice #2	46
Practice #3	47
Chapter Summary	51
Extended Learning.....	53
 Chapter 4: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).....	55
ACE Study	56
Types of Childhood Trauma	57
Toxic Stress on the Developing Brain.....	58
ACE Survey	60
Continued Research.....	61
Impact of ACEs on Learning.....	63
Challenging Belief Systems	67
Practice #1	69
Chapter Summary	70
Extended Learning.....	71
 Chapter 5: Recognizing Trauma Responses.....	73
Stigmatizing Behavior	80
Practice #1	82
Our Own Trauma Histories	83
Practice #2	84
Calming Ourselves to Calm Others.....	84
Practice #3	86
Chapter Summary	90
Extended Learning.....	91
 Chapter 6: Healing Through Safety.....	93
Physical and Emotional Safety	93
Relationships.....	95
Fostering Resiliency and Wellness.....	98
Self-Care	99
Practice #1	101
Mindfulness.....	101
Practice #2	103
Social-Emotional Learning.....	103
CASEL Core Competencies	104
Practice #3	104
Chapter Summary	107
Extended Learning.....	108

Chapter 7: Developing Trauma-Informed Approaches in Schools	109
Schoolwide Practices	110
Cultural Awareness.....	115
Power of Teachers, Administrators, and School Staff.....	116
School Counselors and Mental Health Professionals.....	116
Administrators.....	117
Teachers and Support Staff.....	118
Discipline	120
Practice #1	123
Prevention Through Education and Connection.....	124
Family and Community Engagement.....	126
Chapter Summary	128
Extended Learning.....	129
 References.....	 131
 Index	 139

Preface

MANY ELEMENTARY AND secondary classroom teachers, administrators, and other school personnel have an untapped power of maintaining a position to create formative and positive change in schools, yet they may often be unaware of the possibilities to provide essential healing experiences that can help support students struggling with potentially traumatic experiences. *Developing a Trauma-Informed Perspective for School Communities: An Introduction for Educators, School Counselors, and Administrators* is a supplemental introductory text that will help inform future and current school counselors, educators, and leadership teams about some of the latest research on several topics necessary for developing a trauma-informed perspective. Some of these topics include attachment, neuroscience, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), toxic stress, mindfulness, self-care, and resiliency. A foundation of basic knowledge and awareness of these topics will aid in developing a shift toward having the mindset and skills to recognize how signs of potential trauma may appear and how to best support individuals exhibiting such behaviors through a whole-school approach. This text is not meant to provide a step-by-step implementation process, as true trauma-informed practices maintain a flexible framework that requires purposeful planning and staff collaboration initiated by a leadership team within a school staff or district. The goal of this book is to plant the seeds for priming educators' brains for what is to come in this exciting time of brain and trauma research as the urgency of this topic continues to lead to its introduction into schools across the country and abroad.

Professional development training for teachers often discusses how important it is to meet students where they are in order to be successful and not where we expect them to be without considering a lack of earlier basic foundational support. With the significant research that continues to evolve regarding childhood trauma, attachment, neuroscience, and interpersonal neurobiology, the time has come for us to meet educators and school support staff where *they are* in order to give them the tools they need to feel passionate about their work and serve confidently in their roles. This includes building educator capacity for trauma-informed practices and allowing educators to experience cultivation of relationships themselves if they have not been afforded earlier opportunities. In order to meet the needs of the *whole child*, we must also support the *whole educator*, given that a wealth of research confirms how

relationships and social-emotional development are essential components to children's learning processes.

Students spend a considerable amount of time in school with educators annually, providing the space and time for adults to build meaningful relationships and foster a sense of safety while modeling healthy styles of interaction that may not exist in the majority of a student's life. When we are not aware of what triggers our own distress during the school day and we do not invest in our own self-care to know how to maintain our composure in the presence of students with trauma histories and difficult behaviors, where will our students find the modeling they may desperately need to be successful with academic, social, and emotional development? Developing a trauma-informed perspective allows us to disrupt the patterns potentially preventing educators from demonstrating true empathy and compassion with students who may be struggling with trauma through difficult behaviors. Because trauma-informed approaches require a refining of practices over time, ongoing reflection, and investment in working on the self as an educator, setbacks in the process are expected and necessary for practicing positive shifts in ways of being and supportive professional relationships. We cannot expect our students to learn from their mistakes and thrive if we are not able to model our own wellness and empowerment in readiness for the unexpected, unknown, or discomfort with life challenges.

Purpose and Structure of the Book

This book's purpose is to provide a foundation of knowledge related to the science and research fueling the apparent need for trauma-informed practices in schools, which has typically not been included in the curriculum for education programs preparing school counselors and other leaders in the field of education (Goodman-Scott, 2015; O'Grady, 2017). There is an urgency to address the increasing need for schools to respond to and support various types of student issues stemming from potential trauma, as school staff members frequently encounter student behaviors or situations they do not feel confidently equipped to support. A challenge that consistently arises when advocating for students during consultations with educators is the robust skepticism toward accepting the paradigm shift from an often ineffective deficit mindset of quick "fixing" to a holistic and collective approach that requires patience while addressing student behaviors through relationships to encourage development of self-efficacy skills. The extreme difficulty getting buy-in from current school staff about trauma-informed approaches that is still so common and strong throughout many educational climates confirms the dire need for its introduction in education training programs. Understanding how relationships play a crucial role in healing trauma and building strong communities ultimately impacts school attitudes and creates a paradigm shift toward authentic safety and security (Cozolino, 2013; Perry, 2017; Siegel, 2015).

The text includes a restatement of research not easily accessible or acknowledged in introductory courses yet significantly relevant to the study of any field related to working with

students in a school environment. Each chapter contains a brief “Self-Check” and a brief “Reflection” question related to the section it follows, which allows readers to engage in reflecting about how their past experiences might be impacting their current practices with students. Each chapter also concludes with one or more “Practice” exercises and one “Connect and Reflect” section that apply the concepts from the chapter to real-world situations, includes critical thinking questions, and additionally explores how the reader might approach specific situations considering best practices. Chapters 2, 3, and 6 provide links to brief videos to supplement the reader’s learning of the chapter’s content. A case study is also included at the end of each chapter to provide context for the chapter’s topic in a school scenario with discussion questions. A majority of these features require much reflection by the reader, which is necessary for enhancing skills in developing educator capacity for providing trauma-informed approaches with students.

Benefits of the Book

My own sense of personal success in my work with students and colleagues develops from the internal gratification that is felt from making an intentional effort to reflect on valuable past experiences and apply research-based neuroscientific principles to the art of human relationships. What that looks like exactly cannot be described in a fixed manner, nor can it develop overnight, as it transpires from each individual’s way of being with others that embodies an authentic lifelong practice of understanding the primary value of meaningful relationships in fostering positive neural development. What it *can* do is help the healing processes for individuals struggling with trauma through shared restorative moments of being fully present, engaged and connected. It is an energy you might feel when you walk into a school building based on your interactions with multiple students and staff that gives you a sense of safety, inclusion, trust, camaraderie, and inspiration to be your best self. It is not enough for just one or a few staff members in a school building to understand the impacts of trauma on students, as buffering healing environments are only strengthened by consistency within a collective team of professionals committed to investing in the current and future well-being of students, families, educational systems, and communities.

Schools have a collective responsibility to meet student needs, and developing awareness about the impacts of trauma through reflection processes is the first step toward creating a responsive and holistic model that embraces connection and integrates trauma-informed education. An additional benefit that comes with successful experiences and outcomes over time is that this process fosters a desire to seek out additional learning to enhance professional knowledge and practices about supporting students using universal approaches. This text provides a basic overview of related disciplines contributing to the latest relevant research on brain and human development in order to stay current in the field and empower professionals to step into the education field with a basis of knowledge that will enhance their skills and practice with students. It also discusses common terms associated with trauma-informed care

for undergraduate and graduate students who are preparing to enter a field they passionately and profoundly aspire to serve and, as anyone who has worked in elementary and secondary education can attest, are typically at extremely high risk for burnout. Undergraduate and graduate students can intentionally apply this awareness to their continuing studies and future work in schools and communities to advocate for meaningful and systemic change toward a whole-school trauma-informed approach.

The Need for Trauma-Informed Schools

WHAT THOUGHTS IMMEDIATELY come to mind when you hear the word *trauma*? Maybe you think about physical abuse, neglect, or assault. Or it could be that you envision specific incidents such as a school shooting, a fatal car accident, the death of a loved one, a kidnapping, or a terrorist attack. Any of these examples have the potential for creating traumatic experiences, which can unfortunately result in negative physical and emotional responses beyond an individual's control. Trauma has the power of seeping into our everyday lives in the most intricate and subtle ways. A common view of trauma has often been related to a catastrophic event, a natural disaster, or an acute crisis.

Schools have a collective responsibility to meet the challenging needs of students struggling with trauma by creating a physically and emotionally safe learning environment. It is important to understand the harmful impacts of punitive discipline for students in schools, especially when their negative behaviors can potentially stem from responses to traumas that are not recognized by educators and support staff. This specific need for providing a positive, responsive, and holistic school community as a means for healing and reducing trauma-related behaviors can be met by first equipping educators with basic knowledge about trauma, trauma-informed mindsets, and the understanding that there is meaning behind behavior.

Current research indicates the foundation of trauma encompasses a wider range of sources than previously acknowledged. One of the most enlightening discoveries from the last decade of research holds great significance for our work in schools: our patterns of experiences related to daily human interactions can either help exacerbate

Learning Objectives

1. What are the history and rationale driving schools toward trauma-informed approaches?
2. What is *trauma*, and what does it mean to be *trauma-informed*?
3. What are the four key assumptions of a trauma-informed approach described by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration?
4. What are the basic differences between trauma-informed and non-trauma-informed mindsets?

or help heal the body's response systems to trauma, ultimately affecting the course of how we function for the rest of our lives. Unresolved trauma has the capacity to develop into serious issues that become difficult for an individual to heal from when the body is involuntarily wired for survival in response to constant states of stress or fear. This discovery creates the potential capacity for school environments to become increasingly challenging for school counselors, teachers, administrators, and additional school staff to support and maintain an appropriate level of wellness.

Reflection

What are some reasons you are choosing to join the education field and work in school settings?

This chapter will begin with an introduction to the recent history of school practices in public education that continue to support the current desire for trauma-informed approaches in schools and will continue with a basic approach to recognizing the difference between a trauma-informed and non-trauma-informed mindset to help develop an understanding of how authentic human connection, trust, and respect are at the core of a positive relational culture.

Zero Tolerance Policies

The widely accepted zero tolerance school practices regarding discipline measures over the past two decades in the United States has progressed into a culture of imposing severe and unjust consequences across educational settings, particularly for disadvantaged youth and students of color (Heitzeg, 2009). Unfortunate occurrences of school shootings and gun violence in U.S. schools during the late 1980s and 1990s sparked national concern over safety in schools and resulted in Congress passing the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, requiring states to mandate expulsion of students for possession of firearms on school property. This led to the adoption of zero tolerance policies across the nation and developed into a prevalent reliance on suspension or expulsion to address student issues beyond the initial intention of creating such policies, such as disruptive classroom behavior.

Zero tolerance policies initially served as a resolution to address student possession and/or use of firearms, weapons, alcohol, and drugs on school property. Although the intention of such harmful and punitive policies was meant to maintain a safe and secure learning environment, these counterproductive practices evolved into negative outcomes that continue to push students out of school by means of expulsion, suspension, and arrests for nonviolent or slight violations of student conduct policies (Heitzeg, 2009). This ultimately contributes to what is known as the *school-to-prison pipeline*, a system in which public schools have served as “feeder”

schools for the criminal justice system by enforcing extreme disciplinary action through suspension/expulsion *and* referrals to the juvenile justice system (Advancement Project, 2005). Such school policies used as a “one-size-fits-all” response to address intentional misbehavior of students also apply severe punishments to student behavior related to emotional issues or other disabilities, thus neglecting to acknowledge or understand the circumstances of misbehavior or any potential influence of a student’s particularly unique experiences leading up to the misconduct (American Bar Association, 2001). Additionally, youth minorities are disproportionately affected by the excessive and unnecessary involvement with the justice system due to the focus on offenses rather than student needs (Justice Policy Institute, 2018). Consequences such as out-of-school suspension may lead youth to engage in criminal behavior, predominantly the African American population in comparison to Caucasian youth (Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015).

Several documented incidents demonstrate how zero tolerance policies have been used as inappropriate responses to student behaviors labeled as defiant and disrespectful, resulting in life-changing unintended consequences for affected students (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2017). Numerous school incidents have been reported over the last two decades that are related to unjust punishments. Following are just a few examples, documented in the research from the Advancement Project (2005), of specific cases in which students were given consequences leading to suspension or expulsion that may have accompanied unnecessary referrals into the juvenile or criminal justice systems due to the implementation of zero tolerance policies:

- A 10-year old elementary student was pulled out of class and handcuffed for bringing an 8-inch pair of scissors to school and was held at the police station for 8 hours. Scissors were included in the state law’s definition of a potential weapon. The student was not charged, since it was clear that the student was using the scissors for a school project and had no intentions of using them as a weapon but was still suspended for 5 days.
- A high school student in North Carolina was criminally charged and potentially faced 30 days in jail for cursing in front of a teacher. Charges were dropped.
- An 8-year-old student in Kentucky hit and kicked his teacher as she attempted to physically remove him from the classroom for misbehaving. The student was charged with felony assault, although the juvenile court judge ultimately dismissed the charges.

Reflection

What are some of your initial thoughts about or reactions to these examples? Discuss whether you agree or disagree with any of the consequences given for each student in each example and explain why.

Since these harsh disciplinary measures have frequently been used in response to minor or nonviolent infractions, zero tolerance policies do not take into consideration the lack of differentiation between students with intent to harm and students with behavioral issues that require mental and emotional support (American Bar Association, 2001). The unfortunate outcomes for many vulnerable and behaviorally challenged students include unnecessary emotional trauma, embarrassment, denial of education from forced absence in the classroom, and inaccurate stigma and labeling as “delinquents” or “criminals” (Heitzeg, 2009; Sporleder & Forbes, 2016).

SELF-CHECK

Reflect on what you feel your strengths are as an educator or school specialist. What areas might you need growth in and why? Try to include areas of academics, your attitude(s) toward education, and your relationships with students.

Trauma-Informed Schools in Action

Lincoln High, an alternative high school located in the rural city of Walla Walla, Washington, was widely known by the community as one of the most underperforming schools in the district due to its consistently chaotic environment. Students at Lincoln High were transferred from the main high school in Walla Walla, which led to several challenges for Lincoln High’s faculty and staff, who were dealing with a wide array of serious student issues, such as substance abuse, low academic achievement, truancy, arrests, and physical fights (Pritzker, Scully, & Redford, 2015).

Jim Sporleder joined the faculty as the new principal of Lincoln High and initially experienced a school climate that was desperately out of control and ineffective in using traditional methods of addressing student behaviors. Sporleder attended a conference in 2010 regarding complex trauma, where he learned about the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study and the significant impacts of neglect and abuse on the neural and physical development of children. The evidence presented in the ACE study sparked Sporleder’s motivation for creating successful change in approaches with students as a school, ultimately transforming Lincoln High into an environment where students are able to thrive with the unconditional support and guidance of the adults they encounter every single day at school.

The results were dramatically astounding, as disciplinary office referrals decreased from 600 in 2009–2010 to 320 in 2010–2011 and then continued

to decline to 280 referrals in 2011–2012 and 242 in 2012–2013 (Sporleder & Forbes, 2016). Additional positive outcomes were measured, such as significant decreases in school incidents involving police and the total number of days students were not present in school as well as increases in graduation rates and state assessment scores (Sporleder & Forbes, 2016). This remarkable achievement gained warranted widespread recognition, which led to the filming of Lincoln High in the documentary *Paper Tigers* during the 2012–2013 school year. The term “trauma-informed” in reference to schools was coined as the new cutting-edge approach to addressing the impacts of trauma that can create barriers to student learning as well as student behaviors that challenged the zero tolerance policies that had become widely accepted and normalized as the default method for discipline in schools. Other schools and districts in Washington state followed suit and began implementing trauma-informed practices under this model, and training on trauma-informed approaches is increasingly becoming highly desired or required for school staff in various districts/schools across the country. In some cases, outsourced professionals are required to have trauma-informed training before stepping into school buildings as support staff so that students struggling with trauma histories can be appropriately supported and unintended retraumatization does not occur. Lincoln High is an example of an extremely high-needs student population. Other school populations vary, as every school culture is unique to its surrounding community.

During the 2014–2015 school year, Park Middle School in Antioch, California, had reached a student suspension rate of 19.2 percent by the month of February (Udesky, 2018). Repeated suspensions did not have positive impacts on disruptive student behavior, and teachers were becoming discouraged, on the verge of burnout. The school initiated a 3-year trauma-informed program to shift from a toxic organization with low morale to a healthy culture that fosters resilience and healthy relationships for students. After only 2 years of incorporating this program, the rate of suspensions remarkably decreased to 8.4 percent, more than a 50 percent drop (Udesky, 2018).

Many of the issues currently facing education include systems that are not equipped with enough resources to support the wide array of student needs, especially when the students come to school with unique experiences influencing various levels of social, emotional, and cognitive abilities and challenges (Cozolino, 2014). Children who often come to school feeling tired, hungry, distressed, and isolated from exposure to a wide array of issues—such as homelessness, incarceration, alcohol, drugs, neglect, abuse, or mental health issues—are often deprived of meaningful connections with family, school, and community and are at risk for failing out of school or struggling with learning challenges (Wolpow, Johnson, Hertel, & Kincaid, 2016). With the emerging research in the fields of neuroscience, attachment and interpersonal neurobiology, understanding trauma and its devastating impacts on student learning and mental/ physical health is beneficial and necessary for supporting the diverse needs of school populations. As a result, compassionate relationships and authentic nurturing experiences offered to students may serve as a gateway to reversing the damaging effects of trauma.

Introduction to Trauma

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), “Individual trauma results from an **event**, series of events, or set of circumstances that is **experienced** by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse **effects** on the individual’s functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being” (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 7). SAMHSA focuses on the three *Es* of trauma that are all mentioned in the above definition: *events*, *experience*, and *effects*.

Events in this description may translate into a single or repeated occurrence and encompasses severe threat or neglect that endangers healthy development, and adverse *effects* characterized as prolonged may either occur immediately or be delayed. *Experiences* involve each individual’s unique perception of what has happened that may or may not result in trauma with physical and emotional responses. For example, any event may be experienced as traumatic for one child and not for another, and this is determined by how an individual interprets and applies meaning to a particular event; “responses to these experiences often manifest in behaviors or conditions that result in involvement with the child welfare and the criminal and juvenile justice system or in difficulties in the education, employment, or primary care system” (SAMHSA, 2014, p. 5).

Trauma has also been defined in various ways as it specifically relates to the school setting. Wolpaw, Johnson, Hertel, and Kincaid (2016) describe trauma as “an umbrella term denoting the inability of an individual or community to respond in a healthy way (physically, emotionally, and/or mentally) to acute or chronic stress. Trauma occurs when stress compromises the health and welfare of a person and his/her community” (p. xiv). This definition of trauma focuses on an individual’s overwhelming stress levels as a result of experiencing an event and the individual’s unhealthy responses as a result of such stress.

A wide range of experiences have the potential to cause trauma to a child, and the behavior or anxiety manifesting from such trauma is often met with judgement or dismissive remarks by an observer who may not understand the context of the situation. As a result, thoughts or statements from an adult uninformed about trauma may include the following, which assume an impression that may exhibit an unwillingness to be receptive or understanding about another individual’s experience(s). As you read them, consider that they could be addressed to a child who has not yet reached cognitive, emotional, or physical maturity appropriate for their developmental level:

1. It’s not a big deal
2. You’re choosing to act this way
3. Just get over it
4. You need to get tough
5. You’re fine
6. I got through it, and I’m fine

Just as with zero tolerance policies, identifying traumatic experiences is not a “one-size-fits-all” classification, nor should it be used in that manner regarding school discipline policies.

We will expand further with more depth on trauma and how it impacts our neurobiology in Chapters 2 and 3 and explore how the type of responses above can relationally cause significant harm to a child's healing process when their behavior is a symptom of trauma. To begin the process of developing a trauma-informed perspective, it is essential to broaden our personal views of which experiences can potentially generate trauma and look beyond our own biases to make sure we are not causing continued harm to a child who is depending on us for safety and healing. Romero, Robertson, and Warner (2018) explain that:

Educators may also have in-group biases and can be more critical towards someone who looks like them or had similar childhoods than someone not in that group (e.g., teachers who grew up poor and now teach poor students, White teachers assuming all staff of color grew up poor and vice versa). It's the *I made it; what's wrong with you?* And not the *I made it and I want to help you too*. If you find yourself having in-group bias, stop and do some deep self-analysis and work toward seeing yourself at the same age as your student and what you would have wanted a teacher or principal to see in you. A student whose daily home life is full of adversity not only needs you as a role model but needs you to help feed his or her resiliency. (p. 58)

What is the general overarching goal of schools? If it is to provide a physically and emotionally safe and equitable learning environment that supports the academic success of all students, then it is necessary for schools to take into consideration the unique experiences of each student as they enter school each day and be sensitive to how those experiences can positively or negatively impact their ability to learn, as well as how a school and classroom climate contribute to a student's ability to achieve academic success. The inverted-U learning curve developed by Yerkes and Dodson (1908) demonstrates how moderate levels of stress or arousal correlate with optimal learning and performance. Figure 1.1 is an adapted version of the inverted-U learning curve and helps us to understand how classroom learning can be enhanced by creating a safe emotional school climate that maintains healthy levels of stress and anxiety for students.

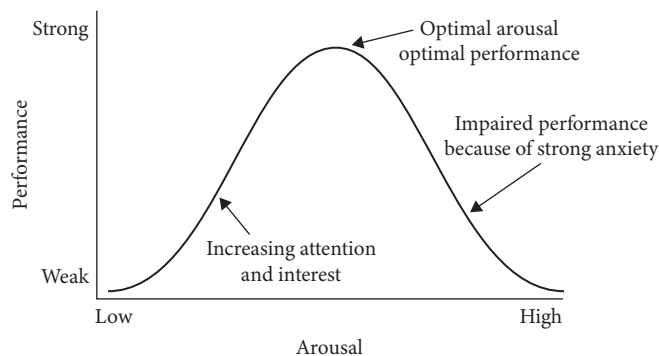


FIGURE 1.1. Inverted-U Learning Curve

The continuum of behaviors from the curve correspond with the three types of states and examples presented below (The National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine, 2019; Spolander & Forbes, 2016, p. 118):

Hyperarousal – Inability to focus or sit still, resistant to rules or directions, argumentative, impulsiveness, anxiety, overwhelmed, angry, desire to fight or flee

Regulated – Attentive, feel safe, open to learn new information, receptive, resilient, can deal with what is happening in your life, stressors are manageable and do not hinder your functioning

Hypoarousal – Defiant, shuts down, tardy or absent, avoids tasks, forgetful, disengaged, indifferent, zoned out, freeze mode, spacey, numb, withdraws from social opportunities

Siegel (2010) describes how each individual develops a unique *window of tolerance* that can help explain “how comfortable we feel with specific memories, issues, emotions, and bodily sensations. Within our window of tolerance we remain receptive; outside of it we become reactive” (p. 137). A regulated state, as described above, falls within an individual’s window of tolerance, and hyperarousal or hypoarousal states signify periods of functioning outside the window of tolerance.

Based on the population and culture of any given school, various factors can contribute to an elevated level of anxiety or traumatic stress among students and school staff, including (but not limited to) violence, drugs, bullying, natural disasters, high-stakes testing, homelessness, immigration policies, physical or emotional abuse and neglect, social media, relationship or family distress, feelings of loneliness, isolation, and/or marginalization, poverty and impacts of a fluctuating economy or recession, and the state of the current sociopolitical climate.

Practice #1

Take a moment to think about what issues or experiences help you stay within your own window of tolerance and what might push you outside your window. Do you react with hyperarousal or hypoarousal behaviors or both? In the window below, label some personal experiences unique to you in which you might correspond to the designated area. Examples are provided in each section.

HYPERAROUSAL:

<i>Inconsiderate drivers/road rage</i>	<i>Fight mode, anger</i>	<i>Experiencing poor customer service</i>
<i>Fear of heights; bridges</i>	<i>Harm to animals</i>	<i>Unfairness/unprovoked hostility</i>

WINDOW OF TOLERANCE: <i>Regulated</i> <i>Skipping meals</i>	<i>Roller coasters</i> <i>Trying a new food</i>

HYPOAROUSAL:

- Constant negative feedback*
- Sensing favoritism/unfairness*
- Reprimanded by an authority figure in front of peers*

Trauma-Informed Approach

SAMHSA (2014) also offers the following description of a trauma-informed approach:

A program, organization, or system that is trauma-informed **realizes** the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; **recognizes** the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; and **responds** by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices, and seeks to actively **resist re-traumatization**. (pp. 9–10)

The four *Rs* support the key assumptions of a trauma-informed approach described by SAMHSA (2014) and include:

1. Realization that all members of the community (organization, school, etc.) understand the effects of trauma and how it is integral to other systems and should be systematically addressed
2. Recognizing the signs of trauma is essential
3. Responding appropriately in applying trauma-informed principles through staff training, financial resources, and leadership
4. Resist retraumatization of students and staff (pp. 9–10)

Susan Craig (2017) additionally describes trauma-sensitive schools as “safe zones, which buffer students from external forces that threaten their potential while at the same time fostering the skills teens need to regulate internal emotions and drives” (p. 5). The drive for schools to begin shifting toward positive climates that support trauma-exposed students with learning, focus, and behavior management stems from acknowledgement that “schools are the central community for most children” (Cole et al., 2005, p. 7). Trauma-informed practices can benefit all students and school personnel, including those who are not struggling with trauma histories. This approach promotes a universal philosophy that can be effective in fostering harmonious school communities over time as a result of increased positive relationships, engagement in learning and school culture, and a sense of decreased stress levels among students, families, and staff.

Behavior Is Communication

Becoming trauma-informed means not only understanding trauma but also understanding that caring relationships are essential in fostering the positive development of youth. Children suffering from trauma do not exhibit a clear-cut list of academic and behavioral challenges, as each child’s experience and response to trauma is unique. What they do have in common is the fact that living with the trauma can impede skills related to social-emotional development and lead to behavioral coping methods that may cause frustration and stress for educators. In the context of relationships, Van der Kolk (2014) explains:

Trauma, whether it is the result of something done to you or something you yourself have done, almost always makes it difficult to engage in intimate relationships. After you have experienced something so unspeakable, how do you learn to trust yourself or anyone else again? Or, conversely, how can you surrender to an intimate relationship after you have been brutally violated? (p. 13)

In school environments, student behavior characterized as acting out is often used as a coping strategy to communicate the desire for a positive connection with an adult, and this basic relational need must be met first in order to successfully access cognition for learning (Smith & Lambert, 2008). School faculty and staff are often kept in the dark about the negative experiences some students endure outside regular school hours, and this makes it difficult for adults to understand the root of academic and behavioral challenges (Cole et al., 2005).

The idea of *caring* or *nurturing* is often misunderstood as *without consequences*, which is partly the reason why adults find it challenging to shift their perspective and approaches. The concepts of *caring/nurturing* and holding individuals *accountable* are not mutually exclusive; they are both achievable and can be quite successful through means of modeling trust and respect in a nonthreatening climate where a student’s dignity remains intact. Making unmindful misinterpretations about the motivations behind a student’s behavior can often unintentionally lead into dangerous territory, especially when the outcomes may be harmful to that student’s future. It is essential for us to broaden our personal views of how the experiences

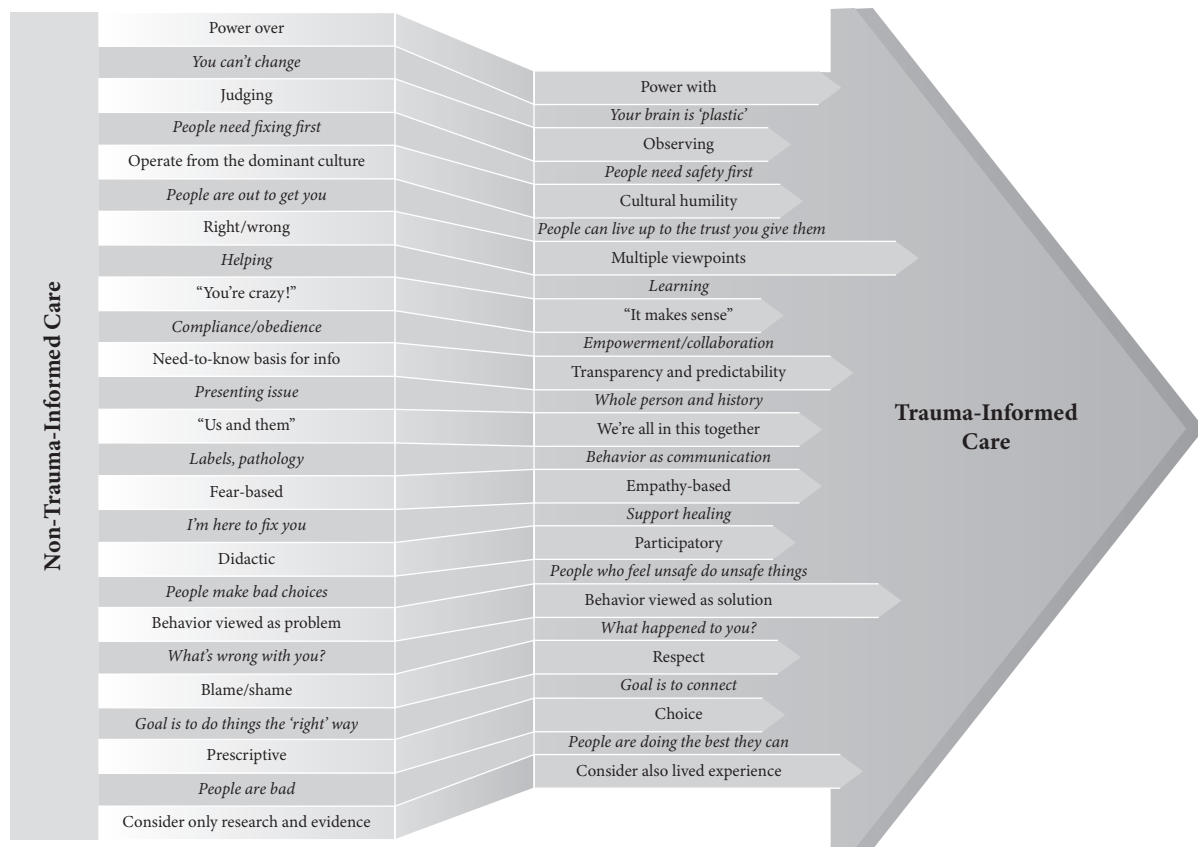


FIGURE 1.2. Trauma-Informed Care

we offer to students can trigger trauma for them, and we must look beyond our own biases to make sure we are not causing continued harm to a child who is depending on us for safety. Take a moment to read through Figure 1.2 from Echo (2017a), which provides examples of the differences between a trauma-informed and non-trauma-informed approach to responding to student behavior.

Figure 1.2 includes several interpretations of concepts that are significant to the discussions in the following chapters. From the second column of the figure, two particular mindsets that can be readily shifted and applied in our efforts toward a trauma-informed approach to students include:

1. Behavior is communication
2. What happened to you?

A common way of showing students respect and care is intentionally shifting language in a way that offers less threatening tones. An example is asking a student "What happened?" with genuine curiosity instead of the customary method of asking, in a threatening tone, "Why did you do that?" or "What's wrong with you?" These last two questions tend to leave

Reflection

What are some questions or comments you have received directly in the past that left you feeling judged or threatened and to which you may have responded defensively? Describe what elements of that experience contributed to your reaction (language, tone, nonverbals, etc.).

the recipient feeling misunderstood and dismissed, as they are often accompanied by a judgmental tone that already implies accusation of a student's ill intent before attempting to understand the details of what happened. Reflect on a time when you did something by mistake or acted on your frustration by behaving in an undesirable manner. If you were asked "Why did you do that?" by a caretaker, teacher, supervisor, manager, administrator, partner, etc. in a nonsupportive tone, what would your first thoughts be about your response when considering your own facial expressions, physical responses, tone of voice, and feelings about yourself? Although this seems like a simple adjustment in the way we respond to students, take a moment to consider why this paradigm shift might be very difficult for some educators and other school personnel to accept or adapt to.

The brain is a social organ; thus, it is in our social nature as humans to crave feeling understood, acknowledged, and valued by others to feel safe and secure enough to contribute to a class environment, school community, or other group on a larger scale (Cozolino, 2013). For some students, verbally telling them you care is simply not enough, especially for those with trauma backgrounds. They must *feel* genuinely cared for to really trust that an adult is looking after their best interests, which is attainable through nonverbal connection and building a trusting relationship.

One of the most challenging questions asked of teachers and parents is "What can you do to show or help students feel that you care about them without telling them 'I care about you' or not using words at all?" At times, the tones or actions associated with "I care about you" when resolving issues or conflicts with students can lead to students remaining unconvinced of feeling cared for based on perceptions of nonverbal ingenuity or dismissive body language and tones. The sensitivity and energy required of this task should commonly be reflected on and developed with continued practice of self-awareness from the adult.

Some general strategies that help students feel a sense of connection with school staff include taking a moment to pause and find out who students are beyond the tests and schoolwork, staying present and engaged while listening so that their insights are taken seriously, and showing respect by *helping* them understand consequences of their actions (Nelsen, 2000). Attending to the relationship through our intentional presence is a strong and effective way to reinforce to students that they matter and are worthy of our attention, regardless of academic achievement or behavioral challenges. The "Two-by-Ten" strategy has been widely used by school staff as an approach to build relationships with students who may present

with difficult behavioral challenges in the classroom and entails having one-on-one conversations with students regarding whatever they desire to talk about for 2 minutes a day, 10 days in a row (Smith & Lambert, 2008). Additional strategies will be discussed later in Chapter 7.

Practice #2

Without looking back at Figure 1.2, create a chart with two columns and headings like the one below and classify each of the given terms in its respective column below: either non-trauma-informed or trauma-informed. When you are finished, continue by writing down your own adjectives, descriptions, or phrases based on your understanding of the differences between the two approaches. Share your responses with a partner or in a group to help generate more ideas for each column and practice mindsets that foster an open mind about ways to view students and each other as human beings worthy of care and respect.

<i>curious</i>	<i>assumptions</i>	<i>hurtful</i>	<i>healing</i>
<i>harmful</i>	<i>"Get over it"</i>	<i>talk with</i>	<i>dismissive</i>
<i>demand</i>	<i>"What happened?"</i>	<i>judgments</i>	<i>talk at</i>
<i>frustrated</i>	<i>request</i>	<i>safety first</i>	<i>labels</i>
<i>expert</i>	<i>connect</i>	<i>support</i>	<i>"you need fixing"</i>
<i>empathy</i>	<i>right/wrong</i>	<i>trust</i>	<i>respect</i>
<i>bad choices</i>	<i>struggling</i>	<i>dignity</i>	<i>"Get tough"</i>
<i>caring</i>	<i>condescending</i>	<i>defiant</i>	<i>nurturing</i>
<i>"Are you okay?"</i>	<i>"I can't deal with you"</i>	<i>"Something's not right"</i>	<i>"I wonder what's going on"</i>

Non-Trauma-Informed	Trauma-Informed

CASE EXAMPLE

Luis, a sixth grader, is sitting in class while his teacher is giving a science lesson. The teacher finishes teaching the 30-minute lesson, assigns related classwork for the remainder of the class period, and then takes a seat at the teacher's desk to engage in various tasks. Luis attempts to engage in the classwork but feels confused about some of the work. He does not complete the expected amount of the assignment within the allotted class time, and the teacher notices as the teacher walks around the classroom during the last few minutes of the class period. The teacher asks Luis, "Why haven't you gotten more work done?" and Luis replies, "I don't know how to do this," as he points to a particular page of his book. The teacher then replies in frustration in front of the entire class, "I just explained it, so you weren't listening. You need to pay attention."

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do you think Luis might interpret the teacher's last statements?
2. What would your own personal thoughts or reactions be if you were Luis in this scenario?
3. What are some possible reasons why Luis did not ask for help when he did not understand some of the assignment?
4. What do you think the teacher could have done differently to help Luis feel respected and valued?

The next chapter will introduce the science behind basic neurobiology to understand how responses and interactions with students can impact behavior and have the potential to create either positive or negative relational experiences, which include possible retraumatization of earlier experiences. Having an increased knowledge base allows us to stay informed and aware of the neurological and biological processes that contribute to an individual's development and resiliency level, based on the experiences we offer through our relationships with students.

Chapter Summary

A trauma-informed learning environment offers a safe and predictable community for all students through positive support and caring adult relationships. Increased achievement disparities, school suspensions, drop-out rates, and disproportionality contribute to rising referrals of youth to the criminal justice system, signaling the urgency for systemic changes to adequately meet the needs of students (Romero, Robertson, & Warner, 2018). Emerging research on trauma continues to provide a deeper understanding of the trauma-related challenges many students face as they struggle to function successfully to meet academic, social, and emotional expectations of the educational system. Moving from punitive disciplinary measures in schools toward authentic human connection, trust, compassion, and respect is

at the core of a paradigm shift fostering a positive relational culture. Developing safe and meaningful relationships with students starts with understanding that behavioral and academic challenges may stem from exposure to trauma.

Connect and Reflect

1. Looking back at Figure 1.2, reflect on your own past experiences as either a student or in a supervising role for children. What kinds of interactions translated into the left column of non-trauma-informed responses, whether you were on the giving or receiving end? What can you remember about how it may have been interpreted (facial expressions, behavior, statements, responses from surrounding peers, feelings about self, etc.)?
2. Now try and do the same reflection for the trauma-informed column. What are some notable differences in how these different styles may be received?

Extended Learning

Abel, S. A., Eggleston, K. B., Green, E. J., & Poe, S. L. (2018). *Becoming a trauma-responsive school: A guide for Virginia leaders*. Richmond, VA: Stop Child Abuse Now.

Cuellar, A. E., & Markowitz, S. (2015). School suspension and the school to prison pipeline. *International Review of Law and Economics*, 43, 98–106.

Mallett, C. A. (2016). The school-to-prison pipeline: Disproportionate impact on vulnerable children and adolescents. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124516644053>

Raible, J., & Irizarry, J. (2010). Redirecting the teacher's gaze: Teacher education, youth surveillance and the school-to-prison pipeline. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26(5), 1196–1203.

Sporleder, J., & Forbes, H. T. (2016). *The trauma-informed school: A step-by-step implementation guide for administrators and school personnel*. Boulder, CO: Beyond Consequences Institute.

Credits

Fig. 1.1: Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:HebbianYerkesDodson.svg>.

Fig. 1.2: Source: https://www.echoparenting.org/dev/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Echo_Arrow_Print_8x11.pdf.