



# Children Come First: Creating and Providing Trauma-Informed Learning Environments

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Educators are currently presented with an urgent call and a unique opportunity to ensure that school policies, practices, and strategies for our youngest learners encompass what research and data tell us is essential to their successful development and learning. For all of its terror, deep sadness, and loss, the COVID-19 pandemic, also provides educators with a unique and essential opportunity to boldly step up and make school a positive and transformative time for children, families, and educators.

**Within the context of the cost of the pandemic to education, the lenses of equity, research, data, parallel processes, and aligned practices must be used to examine the use of trauma-informed practices in our early learning environments.**

**The long-term goal is to increase the number of preschool and early grade classrooms with high quality learning environments that contribute to reducing inequities, closing achievement and opportunity gaps, and supporting young learners.**

Although many children and families experience stress in their lives, the pandemic has added another layer of stress and trauma that has not been experienced in our lifetimes. As a result, young children are coming into early learning classrooms reeling from the impact of their experiences and may also be surrounded by adults who are struggling. Children and adults may have experienced death or terrible illness in their families or with friends. In addition, the adults in these young children's lives may have been unemployed, resulting in economic hardship, food insecurity, homelessness, substance abuse, and social isolation. Many children, after enduring over a year of isolation which likely included a lack of face-to-face connections with other children and adults, as well as an increase in screen time, are entering the early grades with limited background experiences and preparation.

When students returned to in-school learning, teachers reported some children with a wider range of knowledge and skills. Teachers also reported particularly more children with delays across all developmental domains, including lack of self-help skills, weak fine motor control, and difficulties working together with other children. Children and adults of color, in particular, and those who come from less-advantaged homes are over-represented in all of these areas. Without genuine effort and empathy these individuals could suffer further negative impacts instead of success.

Thus, understanding trauma, chronic stress, and its impact on children’s learning is now more important than ever. For schools to effectively meet these new and diverse needs of their youngest learners, understanding the definition of trauma and its impact on young children is an essential first step.

## What Is Trauma?

Trauma can be defined as “an experience that threatens life or physical integrity and overwhelms the capacity to cope” (Erdman et al., 2020, p. 4). Trauma can occur in a single exposure to an event or can consist of chronic exposure to ongoing harm or neglect. It can be experienced in a variety of ways through firsthand, secondhand, or vicarious exposures (Erdman et al., 2020). Much study has been done on the variety and impact on young children experiencing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). ACEs are a collection of potentially traumatic events, such as violence, abuse, or neglect, that occur during childhood from 0 to 17 years (Prevent Child Abuse America®, n.d.). According to the Centers for Disease Control, approximately 61% of adults surveyed across 25 states reported having experienced at least one type of ACE before age 18. Nearly 1 in 6 reported experiencing four or more types of ACEs. In addition, some children are at greater risk for suffering adverse experiences than others, including girls, children of color, and those living in under-resourced or racially segregated neighborhoods (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.).

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***“What the definition of trauma does not tell you is that trauma actually changes the brain. It overwhelms your thoughts, emotions, and body. When you experience something that overwhelms you, it can rewire your brain and body.”***

**Megan Shake. (Youth First, Inc., 2022.)**

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When a child experiences strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity, a toxic stress response may be triggered. This toxic stress that results from exposure to traumatic events can have serious consequences for children, which can include impaired brain development, immune systems, and stress-response systems. The effect of toxic stress negatively impacts children’s abilities to focus, make decisions, and acquire new skills and knowledge. In addition, children experiencing toxic stress also have difficulty building and maintaining healthy relationships. The

good news is that safe, stable, and nurturing childhood relationships have a positive impact on healthy development and wellbeing and can prevent or mitigate ACEs.

## How Can We Respond to Trauma?

The Center for Trauma Resilient Communities (2018) defines a trauma-informed system as “an organizational approach, where all sectors and levels of the organization operate from a trauma-informed lens”. This is what is needed more than ever within our education system.

The Sanctuary® Model by Dr. Sandra Bloom is a “blueprint for clinical and organizational change which, at its core, promotes safety and recovery from adversity through the active creation of a trauma-informed

community. A recognition that trauma is pervasive in the experience of human beings forms the basis for The Sanctuary® Model’s focus not only to the people who seek treatment, but equally on the people and systems who provide that treatment” (Sanctuary Institute, n.d., Sanctuary Model, para. 1). This parallel process is one in which the conditions that are considered desirable for one group are the very same as those established for others. It is important to make use of the idea of parallel process to look for the ways in which children, teachers, administrators, and family members can all thrive in an environment where individual needs can only be met if the needs of all are also met.

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***“Creating and sustaining safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments for all children and families can prevent ACEs and help all children reach their full potential.”***

**(Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.)**

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***“Organizations are impacted by chronic stress and organizational trauma and can become toxic environments that add more adverse experiences to those they serve, rather than being healing environments.”***

**(Center For Trauma Resilient Communities, 2022)**

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The foundational pieces of a trauma-informed system include guiding principles (or commitments as referred to by the Sanctuary Institute). When school environments include these commitments in their work, a community of learners can be created among whom relationships are valued and intentionally built and strengthened. This enables young children and adults to be supported in ways which best meet their immediate needs.

**Table 1: The seven commitments of a trauma-informed system**

①	<b>Non-violence</b> – creating physical, psychological, social, ethical, cultural, and racial safety through modeling, open communication, and the setting of boundaries
②	<b>Emotional intelligence</b> – the ability to perceive accurately, assess and express emotions through building connections; being present and understanding the relationships between behavior and experiences, thus developing emotional management skills
③	<b>Social learning</b> – implies we are all an integral part of the learning process that helps to build cognitive skills
④	<b>Open Communication</b> – using both verbal and nonverbal language, along with word choices and attitude to promote nonviolent, emotionally intelligent communication
⑤	<b>Social Responsibility</b> – shifting the emphasis from “me” to “we” and realizing we are all responsible to each other including confronting abuses of power and inequity through a lens of justice and established healthy attachment relationships
⑥	<b>Democracy</b> – building the ideals of democracy into our systems through sharing and fostering responsibility, self-regulation, and inclusive decision-making which empowers children and adults to participate
⑦	<b>Growth and Change</b> – remembering that change is constant, and providing opportunities for growth to effectively work through loss and to prepare for the future

Sources: <https://www.crossnore.org/about-crossnore/> and <https://www.thesanctuaryinstitute.org/about-us/the-sanctuary-model/>. Used with permission.

Young children, especially those who have experienced trauma, first and foremost must be in spaces where they feel safe. They must feel valued as an important part of a community where they find themselves smart, capable, and know they belong. Caring adults can use the following strategies to support and empower young children as they learn to cope with the changes in their world in a healthy way. Through these experiences, young children in preschool–3rd grade and beyond can gain the skills they need to appropriately respond, adapt, and remain in control. Teachers can:

- provide safe spaces;
- model healthy responses;
- use serve-and-return interactions;
- focus on social-emotional development;
- use a strength-based approach;
- help children learn to regulate their emotions (core life skill);
- use positive guidance;
- help children turn around negative thinking;
- provide experiences in art, music, and dance;
- celebrate the joys in life; and
- have patience and persevere.



Too often schools counter these practices. They instead remain focused on test scores, and unrealistic expectations for both children and adults. Too often schools fail to respond to the realities that call for a broader response to what all people in a school environment need to thrive. Recognition and support should be provided for all domains of development (i.e., physical, social, emotional, language, and cognitive), and integrated learning should occur within and across the domains. Punitive discipline, particularly suspension, expulsion, and other measures preventing children from access to learning is inappropriate and ineffective. The ultimate goal is for all young children in preschool–3rd grade to experience a child-centered, play-based, high quality learning environment that is focused on supporting their developmental needs. Specific emphasis should be made to provide each and every child with the resources, space, time, and support needed to emotionally and socially reconnect to the world, their peers, teachers, classrooms, and communities.

The work now is to effectively respond to the impacts of the pandemic to ensure that all policies, practices, and strategies are developed using the lenses of trauma-sensitive and trauma-informed practices. It is time to hit the reset button.

Table 2 lists additional information and resources on trauma, ACEs, chronic stress, and trauma-resilient communities.

**Table 2: Resources on trauma, ACEs, chronic stress, and trauma-resilient communities**

<p><b>Comprehensive Center Network</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Manlan et al., 2021. Implementing trauma-informed practices in rural schools  <a href="https://www.compcenternetwork.org/sites/default/files/National%20Center%202021_TIPSEL%20Rural%20Brief.pdf">https://www.compcenternetwork.org/sites/default/files/National%20Center%202021_TIPSEL%20Rural%20Brief.pdf</a></li> </ul>
<p><b>Crossnore Communities for Children – Center for Trauma Resilient Communities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Home page - <a href="https://www.crossnore.org/center-for-trauma-resilient-communities/">https://www.crossnore.org/center-for-trauma-resilient-communities/</a></li> <li>Resource page - <a href="https://www.crossnore.org/resources/">https://www.crossnore.org/resources/</a></li> </ul>
<p><b>Harvard University Center on Developing Children</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Home page - <a href="https://developingchild.harvard.edu/">https://developingchild.harvard.edu/</a></li> <li>A Guide to Toxic Stress - <a href="https://developingchild.harvard.edu/guide/a-guide-to-toxic-stress/">https://developingchild.harvard.edu/guide/a-guide-to-toxic-stress/</a></li> <li>Toxic Stress Key Concepts - <a href="https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/">https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/toxic-stress/</a></li> </ul>
<p><b>Learning for Justice</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gaffney, C. (2019). When schools cause trauma. <i>Learning for Justice</i>, 62.  <a href="https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/summer-2019/when-schools-cause-trauma?fbclid=IwAR3LELhK7PDq6B_gmJDmYYxTqMYwK3jvyFD1f7tuF7wZeODzXWBwVpl6oEg">https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/summer-2019/when-schools-cause-trauma?fbclid=IwAR3LELhK7PDq6B_gmJDmYYxTqMYwK3jvyFD1f7tuF7wZeODzXWBwVpl6oEg</a></li> </ul>
<p><b>National Association for the Education of Children (NAEYC®)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Erdman, S., &amp; Colker, L.J. with Winter E.C. (2020). Trauma and young children: Teaching strategies to support and empower - <a href="https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/books/trauma-and-young-children">https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/books/trauma-and-young-children</a></li> </ul>
<p><b>Prevent Child Abuse America®</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ACEs/Vital Signs Report Resources &amp; Talking Points - <a href="https://preventchildabuse.org/resources/aces-vital-signs-report-resources-talking-points-2/">https://preventchildabuse.org/resources/aces-vital-signs-report-resources-talking-points-2/</a></li> </ul>
<p><b>Region 6 Comprehensive Center</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Garrett, C., &amp; Ewen, D. (2021). How pandemic relief for K–12 education can support early childhood - <a href="https://region6cc.uncg.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/HowPandemicReliefK-12EducationCanSupportEarlyChildhood_RC6_21_002.pdf">https://region6cc.uncg.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/HowPandemicReliefK-12EducationCanSupportEarlyChildhood_RC6_21_002.pdf</a></li> </ul>



## INQUIRING INTO POLICIES, PRACTICES, AND STRATEGIES

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#### HOW DOES THIS APPLY TO YOUR LEARNING ENVIRONMENT?

- ✓ What impacts of the pandemic have been evident for the adults and children in your setting?
- ✓ How have you effectively responded to the needs of children and adults?
- ✓ Where do challenges persist, and how can you use this information to be more helpful to the children and adults you serve?
- ✓ Think about the strategies listed in Table 1. Talk about and give examples of the ways in which they are enacted in your setting.
  - What does a safe space look like and how is it used?
  - What is a healthy response, and what kinds of issues call for one?
  - What does a serve-and-return interaction sound like and how do you ensure that time for this sort of communication is prioritized?
  - How, and how frequently is joy celebrated?
- ✓ Are there opportunities for conversations with adults and children with questions, such as:
  - What keeps you up at night?
  - What do you need to feel supported?
- ✓ Look at your data.
  - Are children being suspended and/or expelled?
    - If yes, who are the children being suspended/expelled?
  - What is your attendance rate?
  - Which children are absent?
  - Are these children those who have experienced ACEs?
- ✓ If adults in your setting have had professional development in Trauma-Informed Practice, talk about the ways in which the knowledge has impacted their interactions with children and adults.
- ✓ If adults in your setting have not had professional development in Trauma-Informed Practice, research ways in which this can be brought to your setting.
  - Can these practices be integrated into current curricula?

## REFERENCES

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (n.d.). *Fast facts: Preventing adverse childhood experiences*. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/fastfact.html>.
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