



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

Carla Garrett, Sharon Ritchie, Eva Phillips

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During the pandemic, the Region 6 Comprehensive Center (RC6) assembled a team of early learning professionals who determined the need for a statewide early learning collaborative to ensure that school policies, practices, and strategies for PK-3 learners encompass what research and data tell us is essential to their successful development and learning through the pandemic and beyond. In 2021, U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona urged educators to use the pandemic as an opportunity to “reimagine education,” which reinforced the work of the RC6.

This resulted in resources that include a white paper titled “Children Come First: Ensuring School Policies, Practices, and Strategies Lead to Positive 3rd Grade Outcomes,” and the ongoing development of corresponding briefs responding to the specific needs of multi-disciplinary early childhood educators. Resources can be accessed on the Region 6 Comprehensive Center (RC6) website.

This brief addresses the need to be well informed about causes and effects of trauma and toxic stress in the lives of both adults and children, and the ways in which responsive and sensitive practices can prevent and mitigate harm.

Although many children and families experience stress in their lives, the pandemic added another layer of stress and trauma. As a result, many young children came into early learning classrooms reeling from the impact of their experiences and may have been surrounded by adults who were struggling, as well. Children and adults may have experienced death or terrible illness in their families or with friends. In addition, the adults in their 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, entered the early grades with

limited background experiences and preparation. The youngest learners, particularly children of color, as well as overburdened and under-resourced learners, experienced trauma that had the potential to disrupt the architecture of their developing brains. Evidence shows that toxic stress can have lifelong, deleterious impacts on children’s brain development, including on executive function ability (Shonkoff et al. 2012; Shonkoff 2017). Teachers continue to report encountering 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, specifically, and those who come from less-advantaged homes were over-represented in these areas, and without genuine effort and empathy can suffer further negative impacts instead of being bolstered to succeed. It is up to stable, caring adults in their lives to implement well-researched strategies that not only support children’s intellectual growth, but even more importantly, their social and emotional development. This includes an intentional focus on equity—where decisions are prioritized to ensure school is a place where children find themselves smart, capable, and know they belong.

## 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), a collection of potentially traumatic events, such as violence, abuse, or neglect, that occur during childhood from 0 to 17 years (Prevent Child Abuse, 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.).

When a child experiences strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity, a toxic stress response may be triggered. This toxic stress, resulting from exposure to traumatic events can have serious consequences for children, including 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”.

<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/fastfact.html>

## How Can We Respond to Trauma?

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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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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.

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

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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 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> – which implies that we are all an integral part of the learning process which helps to build cognitive skills
4.	<b>Open Communication</b> – using our language, both verbal and non-verbal, along with word choices and attitude to use non-violent, emotionally intelligent communication
5.	<b>Social Responsibility</b> – where we shift from “me” to “we” and realize that 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> – the ideals of democracy are built 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 provides opportunities for growth to effectively work through loss and to prepare for the future

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

Young children, especially those who have experienced trauma, must be first and foremost 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 through 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 skills),
- ✓ use positive guidance,
- ✓ help children turn negative thinking around,
- ✓ 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 of both children and adults, and 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, PK-3rd grade, to experience a child-centered, play-based, high-quality learning environment that is focused on supporting their developmental needs with a specific emphasis on providing each and every child with the resources, space, time, and support they need to reconnect, emotionally and socially, to the world, their peers, teachers, classrooms, and communities.

The work now is to effectively respond to the impacts of ongoing stress and trauma by ensuring that all policies, practices, and strategies are developed using the lenses of trauma-sensitive and trauma-informed practices.

A list of additional information and resources on trauma, ACEs, chronic stress, and trauma resilient communities follows:

<b>Comprehensive Center Network</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ <b>Implementing Trauma-Informed Practices in Rural Schools</b> - <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>
<b>Crossnore Communities for Children – Center for Trauma Resilient Communities</b> <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>
<b>Harvard University Center on Developing Children</b> <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>
<b>Learning for Justice</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ When Schools Cause Trauma - <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>
<b>National Association for the Education of Children (naeyc®)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ 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>
<b>Prevent Child Abuse America®</b> <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>
<b>Region 6 Comprehensive Center</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ 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 continue to be evident for the adults and children in your setting?
- ✓ How have you effectively responded to the needs of children and adults who are struggling with trauma?
- ✓ Where do challenges persist, and how can you use this information to be more helpful?
- ✓ Think about the strategies listed on page 4. 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?

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A copy of this publication can be downloaded from the Region 6 Comprehensive Center website at: <https://region6cc.uncg.edu/resources/>.

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