

What Does It Take To Be a Trauma-Informed School?

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Introduction

This short guide is intended to help school leaders and classroom teachers create trauma-informed learning environments. We answer three questions: *What is a trauma-informed school? What can leaders do? and What can educators do?*

What is a Trauma-Informed School?

Trauma occurs when a person experiences an event that is physically or emotionally harmful and that has lasting, adverse effects.¹ Those who have experienced trauma may have a harder time feeling safe, and when people feel consciously or unconsciously unsafe, this creates persistent stress and a brain-body response that interferes with executive functioning.² In a school setting, that means students who have experienced trauma may be more likely to demonstrate dysregulated behavior or have difficulty staying on task.³

A trauma-informed school understands what trauma is and recognizes its impact on the lives of students, families, and teachers.⁴ Such a school seeks to create a safe, supportive, and predictable learning environment that helps students practice skills and ways of being, both academic and relational. A school needs to consider its approach across various systems and processes to align with the Six Principles of Trauma-Informed Care (figure 1)

FIGURE 1. Six Principles of Trauma-Informed Care



SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Infographic.

What Can School Leaders Do?

Leaders can focus on three key practices to help their school be more trauma-informed: cultivate staff knowledge and buy-in, create a safe environment, and monitor and support students.

Cultivate Staff Knowledge and Buy-In

Leaders can help staff be prepared to support students in the following ways:

- **Offer training** for school adults on trauma and its impact on student learning. Intensive training over several days helps build knowledge and generate support for a trauma-informed approach.⁵ Leaders can also offer training to students and families on trauma and its impact.⁶ See the end of this guide for a list of training materials.
- **Involve staff** to shift school culture, practice, and policy. One way of doing this is through an inquiry process where staff engage in open-ended questions that help them align on vision and scope and then work together to identify improvements.⁷
- Attend to the **needs of teachers and leaders**. Teachers and staff need a foundation for their own wellbeing, as well as self-awareness and communication skills, in order to adequately support students. Some programs for addressing adult wellbeing, social-emotional competencies, and mindsets include [Mindful Schools](#) and [Trust-Based Relational Intervention](#).

Create a Safe Environment

Leaders can help create a safe school environment that supports students who have experienced trauma:

- A trauma-informed school **has a culture** oriented toward compassion, care, and unconditional positive regard toward students and staff.⁸ The school culture should be inclusive of diverse learners on the basis of service provision (students with IEPs and multilingual learners) and race/ethnicity. A [profile of a graduate](#), even at the elementary or middle school level, can be a powerful way to collaboratively shift school culture.
- Check your **discipline model**. A trauma-informed discipline model is not exclusionary, is culturally responsive, and includes student voice and choice.⁹ [Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports](#) (PBIS), [restorative justice](#) and [Collaborative-Problem Solving](#) are all trauma-informed models.
- Seek **regular staff and student input** so leaders know about issues as they arise and the school meets the needs of the community it serves.¹⁰ Schools can do this through surveys, focus groups, or regular input sessions. One informal option is circling from [Circle Solutions](#).

Monitor and Support Students

Leaders can ensure their school has systems and processes to track how students are doing and offer interventions as needed:

- **Identify success metrics** and **monitor** how you are doing. Many schools who attempt a trauma-informed approach do not monitor outcomes, so they have no way of knowing what is working or how to improve their approach.¹¹ Pay particular attention to gaps in outcomes by service area and race/ethnicity. Historically marginalized students are more likely to have experienced trauma, so unless a school sees improvement in closing gaps, their trauma-informed approach is likely not working. Schools can use existing culture surveys and school information systems to track student belonging, self-esteem, attendance, referrals, behavioral incidents, and suspension rates.¹²

- **Schools can consider a screener** to identify whether students have had exposure to traumatic events.¹³ This should be done with care and only when the school has appropriate resources, as taking a screener can be traumatizing for a student. One common resource is the [ACE test](#).
- **Provide sufficient support** by having systems in place to catch early signs and help students develop lagging social-emotional and academic skills. [Multi-Tiered System of Supports](#) (MTSS) help schools focus on prevention and support,¹⁴ especially with consistent [student teaming](#). These are meetings where staff discuss students who are struggling, devise appropriate strategies, and monitor their progress.
- Help students **build self-regulation, communication, and relationship skills**. This can be done through a restorative justice model, social-emotional curriculum, or your instructional approach.
- Connect students and families to **community resources** so they have what they need to meet their basic needs and experience safety outside of school.¹⁵

What Can Educators Do?

Creating a trauma-informed learning environment depends on many systems and processes that are outside the control of a classroom teacher. However, even in a school that does not have many of the systems talked about thus far, a teacher can still create a trauma-informed classroom by attending to the learning environment, building strong relationships with and among students, and modeling self-awareness and regulation.

- Create a **safe and calm classroom environment** by clearly communicating expectations, establishing transparent processes, and being consistent in your follow-through. Try to make classroom routines predictable and reduce sensory overload. Normalize emotional experiences and offer choice in how students regulate, such as options for movement.¹⁶
- Provide students with appropriate opportunities for **voice and choice in learning**. This allows them to build self-regulation skills and cultivate a sense of competence.¹⁷
- **Build strong relationships** with your students and among your students. As a teacher, you can practice care, positive regard, and non-judgement while also maintaining firm and clear boundaries. You can also create a classroom where students are connected to one another through instructional activities, project-based learning, and social-emotional curriculum.
- **Watch and report** signs of violence and other trauma. As a teacher, you can promote an environment of wellbeing, but you are not a mental health professional.
- **Model self-awareness and regulation**. A dysregulated adult cannot support a dysregulated student.¹⁸ Your school should offer training and support. If it doesn't, you can access resources from [Mindful Schools](#) or similar programs.

Conclusion

Being a trauma-informed school means shifting away from control and punishment toward empathy and relationship-building, while still maintaining firm and clear boundaries. It will take time for both students and teachers to adjust. However, the benefit is a learning environment that creates the conditions for students to experience success in school and beyond. Trouble-shooting implementation is beyond the scope of this guide, but see our resource list or seek out curriculum, training, and consultants who identify as trauma-informed.

RESOURCES

These training and informational resources can be used school-wide or by classroom teachers:

- [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)
- [Secondary Traumatic Stress: A Fact Sheet for Child-Serving Professionals](#)
- [The Trauma-Sensitive Schools Training Package](#)
- [The National Center for School Safety toolkit](#)
- [Trauma-Informed Schools 101](#)
- [Trauma-Informed Care for Children Exposed to Violence](#)
- [Trauma-Informed Resources for Educators](#)
- [UCSF HEARTS](#)

ENDNOTES

- 1 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2014). *SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach*. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/sma14-4884.pdf>
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- 4 National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2008). *Creating, Supporting, and Sustaining Trauma-Informed Schools: A System Framework*. <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/creating-supporting-and-sustaining-trauma-informed-schools-system-framework>
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- 10 Black, P., Henderson-Smith, L., & Flinspach, S. (2021). Trauma-informed, resilience-oriented schools toolkit. National Center for School Safety.
- 11 Thomas, S., Crosby, S., & Vanderhaar, J. (2019). Trauma-informed practices in schools across two decades: An interdisciplinary review of research. *Review of Research in Education*, 43, 422-452. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.3102/0091732X18821123>
- 12 Osher, D., Guarino, K., Jones, W., & Schanfield, M. (2021). Trauma-sensitive schools and social and emotional learning: An integration. *American Institutes for Research*. <https://www.air.org/sites/default/files/2021-09/Trauma-Sensitive-Schools-and-SEL-Integration-Brief-June-2021rev.pdf>
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About Fig Education Lab

We are committed to a more equitable education system that embraces students' diverse backgrounds and closes learning and income gaps. Our mission is to reimagine education by collaboratively designing, implementing, and researching innovative programs that help all learners lead lives that are personally fulfilling, socially connected, and economically secure. We believe the best and most enduring ideas in education come from combining practitioner wisdom, rigorous research, and community assets.