

# Trauma Informed Practice- Trauma Sensitive Schools



Prepared by Vicki Glass  
SAPDC Learning Facilitator  
Feb 2018



# Trauma

Trauma is any experience that leaves a person feeling hopeless, helpless, fearing for their life/survival or their safety. The experience can be REAL or PERCEIVED.

<https://education.alberta.ca/trauma-informed-practice/what-is-trauma-informed-practice/everyone/trauma-informed-practice-video/>



# Turn and Talk

- What resonated with you?
- What was new or surprising?
- How ready do you think your school is to become a trauma sensitive school?

## How common is it?

**26%**

of children in the U.S. witness or experience a traumatic event before they turn four years old.<sup>2</sup>

**41%**

of youth under 18 reported experiencing a physical assault in the last year.<sup>3</sup>

**14%**

of children have experienced abuse by a caregiver.<sup>3</sup>

**60%**

of adults say they experienced abuse or other traumatic family events in their own childhoods.<sup>2</sup>

**11%**

of girls ages 14 to 17 reported experiencing sexual assault or abuse during the past year.<sup>3</sup>

**70%**

of children living in poor inner-city neighborhoods are exposed to trauma.<sup>4</sup>



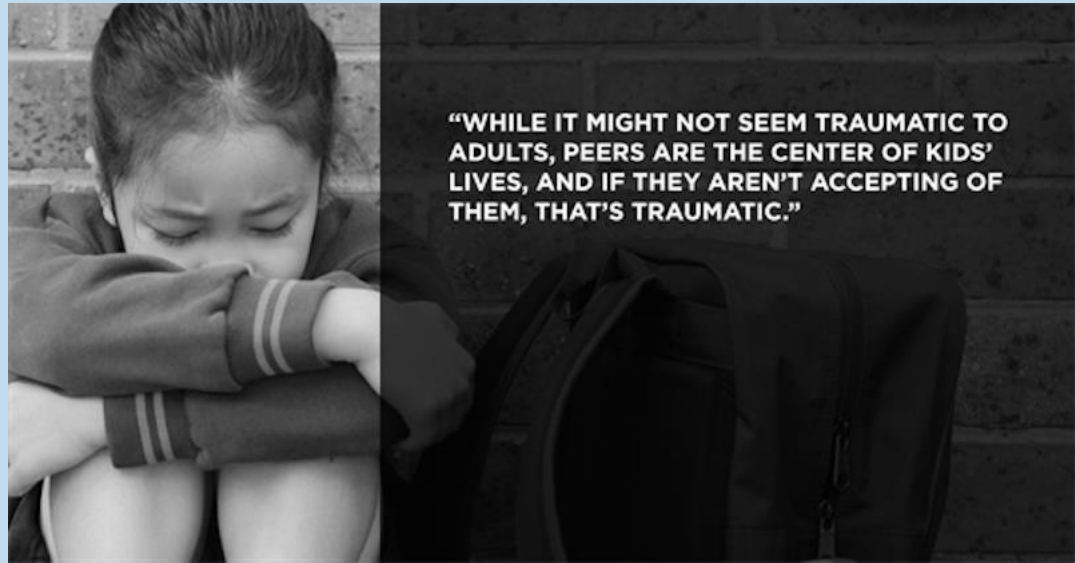
**WeAreTeachers** @WeAreTeachers - Mar 11

Get more [#childhoodtrauma](#) stats & tips w/this free [#infographic](#): [ow.ly/YLW0J](https://ow.ly/YLW0J)  
[#edchat](#) [#K12](#) [#elemchat](#)



# Trauma-informed practice

- Trauma-informed practice creates a school environment where **every** student feels safe and supported and where **all staff** understand how trauma affects behaviour and emotions.



# Foundational Understandings

- When students experience frequent or continued adversity, the stress can undermine their ability to cope.
- Students who have been exposed to unpredictable and uncontrollable danger, such as abuse or severe neglect, live much of their lives in survival mode and respond to the world as a place of danger.
- Traumatic stress can negatively impact a child's developing brain. This can result in learning, memory or social-emotional difficulties.
- No two individuals experience a similar adverse event in the same way.



- A major factor that influences the impact of childhood trauma is the presence or absence of supportive relationships.

**Positive relationships and successful involvement in school can buffer the impact of past adverse experiences.**

- At least one quarter** of the students in any given school have experienced traumatic or adverse experiences.



# ACE's Study from the “good old days”

•The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study, published in 1998, found that extraordinary numbers of adults reported abuse and/or challenging family experiences during childhood. The study asked participants about their experiences in seven categories of childhood adversity:

- physical, sexual or psychological abuse;
- witnessing domestic violence;
- living with a parent with mental illness, substance abuse, or involvement in criminal behavior.

Half of the adults participating in the study had experiences in at least one of these categories as children.





# The Saga Continues...expanded understanding of the prevalence of traumatic experiences in childhood.

Further studies have identified the large number of children who are:

- chronically bullied,
- living with homelessness or food insecurity
- in the proximity of pervasive community violence
- refugees from war-torn countries
- shuttled around in the foster care system
- survivors of natural disasters
- undergo multiple, invasive medical procedures
- live with a parent traumatized (by combat, intergenerational trauma)

Traumatic experiences are more pervasive than many educators currently recognize.





By age  
**16**



More than 2/3 of children reported  
at least 1 traumatic event

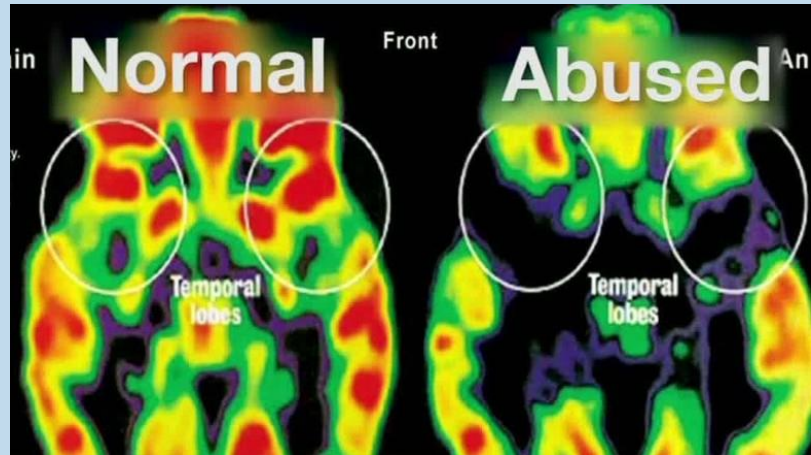
**54%**

*of families have been affected  
by some sort of disaster*



# Toxic Stress

- When a student experiences frequent or prolonged adversity such as physical, sexual or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, or exposure to violence, substance abuse, mental illness or poverty, the stress experience can become intolerable and toxic.



- Students who have been exposed to situations that are unpredictable and uncontrollable live much of their lives in **survival mode**.
- They respond to the world as a place of constant danger, even if the events happened months or years earlier.

“When we talk about how important it is to create safe and caring environments, we are talking about creating the kind of environment, emotional as well as physical, that turns off a child’s alarm.

This produces a shift from what neuroscientists call the ‘survival brain’ to the ‘learning brain.’ “

Dr. Stuart Shanker, York University



# Shifting Our Understanding

- Trauma impacts brain development, and as a result, can affect students' ability to learn and to recognize emotions and regulate their attention and behaviour.
- This may result in impulsive or aggressive behaviour or the opposite, extreme withdrawal and inattentiveness.
- This knowledge provides a new lens—the **Trauma Lens**—through which students and their learning, behavior, and relationships can be seen and understood.



# Why should Schools be Trauma Informed?

Results in:

- Improved academic achievement and test scores.
- ▶ Improved school climate.
- ▶ Improved teacher sense of satisfaction and retention.
- ▶ Reduction of student behavioral out-bursts and referrals.
- ▶ Reduction of stress for staff and students.
- ▶ Reduction in absences, detentions, and suspensions.
- ▶ Reduction in student bullying, harassment and fights.
- ▶ Reduction in the need for special education services/classes.
- ▶ Reduction in drop-outs = Improved graduation rates.



# Trauma Informed Schools

- ▶ View children from the perspective of "**what happened or what is happening?**" rather than thinking, "what is wrong with you?"
- ▶ This perspective moves us away from an emphasis on labels and diagnoses.



# Turn and Talk

- When triggered, children affected by trauma don't think-they react.

Remember: everyone in the classroom has a story that leads to misbehavior or defiance. 9 times out of 10, the story behind the misbehavior won't make you angry. It will break your heart.

— Annette Breaux

TheCornerstoneForTeachers.com





# Functions of the Brain:

## Sensory - Highly Active in Trauma

- Senses
- Memory
- Affect
- Emotional Regulation

## Thinking

- Language
- Reasoning
- Thinking
- Understanding/Processing

This is why we get so many, “**I don’t knows**” when the child is **activated**



# Trauma is a Sensory/Body Experience

- ▶ **Trauma resides not in the event itself; but rather in a person's nervous system.**

Peter Levine

Students need to “feel” safety and success.



# Trauma Informed Schools

- ▶ Understand the impact toxic stress and trauma have on children's bodies and their ability to regulate emotions, behavior and ultimately learn.
- ▶ A trauma-sensitive school is one in which all students feel safe, welcomed, and supported and where addressing trauma's impact on learning is crucial to its educational mission.





**Research indicates  
that school connectedness  
significantly reduces  
the incidence of;**

- ▶ **teen anxiety,**
- ▶ **depression,**
- ▶ **drug use,**
- ▶ **suicide**
- ▶ **and pregnancy.**



# Trauma Informed Teaching- Building Resiliency

1. Always Empower, Never Disempower
2. Provide Unconditional Positive Regard
3. Maintain High Expectations
4. Check Assumptions. Observe. Question.
5. Be a Relationship Coach
6. Provided Guided Opportunities for Helpful Participation.



# Always Empower, Never Disempower

- Believe that controlling their environment is the way to achieve safety.
- Structure and limits provide a sense of safety
- Predictable patterns
- Respectful adults

**A person  
who feels  
appreciated  
will always  
do more  
than what is  
expected.**



# Provide Unconditional Positive Regard

Model respectful relationships, with adults in charge who convey confidence—through tone of voice, demeanor, a calm presence, and in other subtle and overt ways—that they will maintain each student's feeling of safety in the school.





# Maintain High Expectations

- Make it possible for students to master the school's academic and social goals.
- Children often interpret lowered standards as a validation of their own sense of worthlessness, a self-image created by their experiences.
- Help them set goals and celebrate small successes.



# Check Assumptions. Observe. Question.

- We must first understand how children are experiencing what they have been exposed to.
- We can't assume we know.



# Private Logic

- Typically students are doing things to make people reject them - to prove to themselves that their low self image is indeed accurate



- I will do whatever I have to do to let you know that I am terrified!



**•I will do whatever I need to do in order to control you and your responses - I don't trust you and I need to survive!**



- I will fight any experience, any activity, any person that tries to control me because
- I am vulnerable to your abuse, your abandonment - it happened before and it will happen again.



**•I will not do what you want  
me to do because  
if I do and  
do not do well you will  
ridicule me, berate me,  
shame me, abuse me or  
abandon me**





# Trauma Sensitive Practice

- Don't take behaviour personally
- Do look for strengths
- Do look for opportunities and solutions
- Understand that kids who act out don't feel safe
- Understand that behaviour is communication
- Listen to the behaviour and be curious about it



**"CARING CAN BE MORE POWERFUL THAN ANY ACADEMIC LESSON AND MAY BE JUST WHAT A CHILD IN TRAUMA NEEDS MOST."**



# Be a Relationship Coach

- Help students make positive connections to other members of the school community,
  - Provide opportunities for them to use their newly developing skills in context
  - Supporting them as they become fluent in participating fully in the community.

Create a culture of acceptance and respect focusing on a culture where everyone is seen as having something significant to offer and is encouraged and supported to do so.



# Provided Guided Opportunities for Helpful Participation.

- Teach Social and Emotional Skills
- School is often the ONLY true socialization environment for children (especially those living in poverty)



# What to do?

- ▶ Avoid consequences such as suspensions and time-outs
- ▶ USE interactions and comfort corners for time-ins.
- ▶ Exclusionary practices reinforce image of “bad” so child will withdraw

(and it's really hard to get them back!)



# Time In versus Time Out

TIME IN	TIME OUT
Kids act out because they NEED attention	Kids act out because they WANT attention
Time together	Time apart
Give attention, connection	Withdraw attention, disconnect
Opportunity to learn	No opportunity to learn
Adult is there to help child regain a regulated state	Child is left to regain regulated state on their own
Growth, empowerment, acceptance	Punitive, shame, rejection



# How to do a TIME IN:

1. Invite child to sit with you, take a walk with you, be near you (if very aggravated don't touch).
2. Acknowledge that the child is upset, mad, out of control - let them know it is okay to be, but it isn't okay to hurt self, others, be disrespectful.
3. Make eye contact and be firm and kind.
4. "I want to help you calm down..." (Adult must maintain a calm presence).
5. Address misbehavior only after calm but don't lecture - identify, note one or two strategies and move on.
6. Revisit strategy again later and practice.



# Emotional Regulation

- ▶ Living in survival mode makes emotional regulation very difficult for children.
- ▶ They need help from caring adults.





In a trauma-sensitive school educators make the switch from asking  
“**what can I do to fix this child?**”

to

“what can **we** do as a community to **support all children** to help them  
feel safe and participate fully in our school community?”



- Educators maximize children's opportunities to succeed at school, despite the adversities they may have endured, by bolstering them in four key domains:
  - strong relationships with adults and peers;
  - the ability to self-regulate behaviors, emotions, and attention;
  - success in academic and non-academic areas; and
  - physical and emotional health and well-being



# It takes a team, a village

- ❖ Supporting healthy development can't ALL be on the shoulders of one person.  
It takes a school and community of engaged individuals to make it happen.



# Links

- Alberta Education <https://education.alberta.ca/trauma-informed-practice/what-is-trauma-informed-practice/?searchMode=3>
- Alberta Family Wellness Initiative-  
<http://www.albertafamilywellness.org/resources/video/how-brains-are-built-core-story-of-brain-development>



# Thank-you

- Evaluation
- 1 thing you learned
- 1 thing you will try to implement
- 1 comment for presenter

[Vicki.glass@sapdc.ca](mailto:Vicki.glass@sapdc.ca)

