



A Shared Responsibility: Deepening Trauma-Sensitive Practice for System and School Leaders across the Multi-Tiered System of Support

Trauma-sensitive practice is grounded in creating environments where students experience safety, trust, choice, collaboration, agency and affirmation of their identities.

These principles guide how schools respond to student needs, strengthen relationships, reduce barriers to learning and create conditions where all students can belong, heal and thrive. Research has shown that when we enhance positive childhood experiences, like maintaining healthy school environments and social connection, we provide a buffer for adverse childhood experiences and help to support positive mental health outcomes for students, now and into the future (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2023; Samji et al., 2025).

Some school staff may believe that they can't make a difference in helping a student heal from trauma. They may express fear that they don't want to 'make it worse' or 'bring further harm to the student.' When we hear this, it provides an opportunity to speak to how trauma-sensitive practice is a shared responsibility in school boards. We each have a role in creating safe and supportive environments where students can grow, learn, heal and thrive. It is through our relationships, our actions, our policies, procedures and practices that we show students how they belong, how they matter, how we know they are more than their trauma and what happened to them. We see their strengths, their lived experiences and their whole selves that they bring to us every day in schools.

This resource explores the shared responsibility of trauma-sensitive practices across the [multi-tiered system approach \(MTSS\)](#).



Did you know?

A tiered approach brings clarity to the shared responsibility for trauma-sensitive practice by outlining how every staff role contributes to creating a safe, predictable and identity-affirming school environment where students can heal, learn and thrive.

Many trauma-sensitive practices currently used in schools align with Tier One of the Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). However, trauma-sensitive practice extends across all tiers of support.

A multi-system approach to supporting student well-being

Supporting students who have experienced adversity requires a shared responsibility across schools, school boards, community partners and mental health systems. No single role or service can address all student needs alone. A trauma-sensitive approach recognizes the importance of providing the right support, at the right time, by the right people.

The table below outlines the roles and responsibilities across the continuum of care, from foundational trauma-sensitive practices that support all students to more targeted interventions and community-based services for students requiring additional support. Each role contributes to creating safe, connected and responsive environments where students can develop skills, access support and thrive.

Multi-system approach to care: tier	Staff position	Role
Foundational	CEOs, directors of education, superintendents	Create and sustain system-wide conditions that support trauma-sensitive practice. This includes establishing shared understanding through professional learning, supervision and coaching; communicating clear expectations, policies, procedures and protocols; and ensuring trauma-sensitive approaches are embedded throughout the system. Demonstrating alignment across portfolios and showing how work in mental health and equity support achievement is part of this effort.
Foundational	principals, vice-principals, managers	Support the implementation of trauma-sensitive practices within schools and departments by building staff knowledge, skills and confidence through ongoing professional learning, coaching and supervision. Establish consistent expectations and practices that promote safety, connection, regulation and student well-being.
Tier One	educators, other school staff	Create classroom conditions that support positive childhood experiences, like daily welcoming, consistent routines, everyday wellness activities and reinforcing positive peer relationships and cooperation. Pause to understand and respond to student behaviour with compassion, recognizing that there may be stressful life events impacting the student's reactions. Integrate and embed identity-affirming social-emotional learning (IA SEL) strategies, stress and coping, relaxation and healthy relationship skills into regular classroom and school life.
Tier One	student support staff (such as CYWs)	Support mental health promotion and school connectedness through SEL opportunities, emotional validation and life-space intervention. Provide early identification and support for students that may benefit from additional resources, while promoting help-seeking.



Multi-system approach to care: tier	Staff position	Role
Tier Two	school mental health professionals	Provide school-based, evidence-informed, brief intervention supports for students experiencing mild to moderate mental health concerns. Collaborate with students, families, school teams and community partners to identify needs and connect students to additional services when required.
Tier Two & early Tier Three	school mental health professionals	In addition to the above, school mental health professionals support students in developing coping skills, emotional regulation strategies, distress tolerance and understanding of stress and trauma responses when appropriate. This may include psychoeducation about the impact of trauma, identifying triggers and developing strategies to increase regulation and safety. School mental health professionals do not provide trauma treatment within schools; rather, they provide supportive interventions and help connecting students and families with appropriate community-based treatment when needed. Connection to phase one of trauma treatment: School-based trauma-sensitive support aligns with the stabilization and safety-building goals of phase one trauma treatment. This includes helping students develop emotional regulation skills, strengthen coping strategies, increase awareness of their responses, build supportive relationships and create environments where they experience safety and predictability. This foundational work helps prepare students for further trauma treatment when clinically appropriate.
Tiers Three and Four	community service organizations, partners and interest holders	Provide specialized mental health and trauma treatment services beyond the scope of school-based supports. School mental health professionals support students and families in accessing appropriate community or health services and collaborate with external providers to coordinate ongoing care. In some circumstances, regulated school mental health professionals may provide assessment, therapeutic support or crisis intervention when students are unable to access outside services. Referrals to the community by school mental health professionals support trauma-sensitive and culturally responsive community services whenever possible, such as connections to Indigenous healing practices through Indigenous partners for Indigenous students and families when appropriate. Efforts are made to connect families with services that are culturally and identity-affirming (e.g., faith-based or culturally specific supports). Right Time, Right Care supports clear pathways, roles and responsibilities among school boards, community services, hospitals, identity-specific partners and other key stakeholders to ensure students receive the appropriate level of support at the right time.



Reflecting on trauma-sensitive practice in action

A trauma-sensitive approach is not defined by a single practice, initiative or training. Rather, it is reflected in the everyday experiences of students, staff and families. As a school or system leader who sees trauma-sensitive practice as a shared responsibility, how do you know how this is being implemented in classrooms, schools and boards? Consider: *If someone walked into our board, school or classroom, what would they see, hear and experience that demonstrates a trauma-sensitive culture?*

What would I see, hear and observe?

- Does every student experience a sense of safety, belonging, predictability and connection throughout the school day?
- Are student behaviours understood as communication and opportunities for support rather than simply compliance issues?
- Do staff respond to student distress with curiosity, compassion and regulation rather than punishment or escalation?
- Are students provided with meaningful opportunities for voice, choice and agency?
- Are relationships, identity, culture and lived experiences reflected, amplified and valued in the learning environment?
- Do staff model self-regulation, empathy and respectful interactions with one another?

Leadership and system implementation

- How are trauma-sensitive principles intentionally woven into professional learning, staff meetings, coaching, supervision and daily interactions with staff and students?
- How are leaders supporting staff to move from understanding trauma to applying trauma-sensitive practices in their everyday work?
- How is a trauma-sensitive approach reflected in board and Student Achievement Plans, priorities, policies and decision-making processes?
- How are we assessing and reflecting on whether students and staff experience increased safety, belonging and connection?

Building sustainability and capacity

- How are newly hired staff and leaders introduced to, and supported in understanding, our trauma-sensitive approach?
- What ongoing structures are in place to support implementation beyond one-time professional development?
- How are staff supported to recognize and address the impact of stress, compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma?



Connecting to mental health literacy

- How does a trauma-sensitive approach connect with and enhance mental health literacy learning already provided to staff (e.g., system leaders, school leaders, educators, guidance staff and other school teams)?
- How are staff supported in their mental health literacy so they can integrate daily practices that promote safety, connection, regulation and inclusion?
- How do we ensure that mental health and trauma-sensitive practices are embedded into the culture of the system rather than viewed as separate initiatives?

Taking care of ourselves while supporting students

A trauma-sensitive approach recognizes that supporting students who have experienced adversity requires us to care for ourselves as well. Educators and school leaders may experience the impacts of secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue or vicarious trauma when they bear witness to the adversities faced by students and families. It is important to remember that supporting student well-being is a shared responsibility and is not one person's to carry alone. Seeking support, connecting with colleagues, engaging in reflective practice and using available resources are important parts of sustaining this work.

Being trauma-sensitive does not require knowing a student's trauma story. By focusing on the [six principles of trauma-sensitive practice](#) (identity-affirming practices alongside safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration and agency), we create environments where students feel understood, supported and able to learn while also caring for our own well-being. We can respond to the impact of student experiences, not the details of the experiences themselves.

Bringing trauma-sensitive practice into action

Trauma-sensitive practice is a shared responsibility across school staff, system leaders, mental health professionals and community partners. A multi-system approach ensures students receive the right support at the right time while recognizing that all adults contribute to creating environments of safety, connection, belonging and learning.

References

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