



It Starts With Staff: Deepening Trauma-Sensitive Practice for System and School Leaders

Trauma-sensitive environments are shaped by staff in daily decisions, relationships and practices that help students feel safe, seen and supported.

This resource reviews some foundational background knowledge regarding the impact of trauma on child development so that school and system leaders are better equipped to implement and respond with trauma-sensitive practices.

It is a companion to the [system and school leaders trauma-sensitive practice resources](#). It invites leaders to deepen their understanding and commitment to trauma-sensitive practice in ways that are identity-affirming and intentionally establish safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration and agency in every layer of the system. This resource is also aligned with the **Desk Reference for System Leaders: Trauma-Sensitive Practice**, as well as the **Guide for Trauma-Sensitive School Leaders** and **accompanying slide deck**, all of which can be found on the [Trauma-sensitive practice for system and school leaders](#) webpage on the School Mental Health Ontario website.

What is the impact of trauma on child development?

The 1998 Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study demonstrated that exposure to significant adversity during childhood can have long-term impacts on health and well-being. The study found that adults who experienced a greater number of adverse experiences in childhood were more likely to engage in health-risk behaviours, including substance use and smoking, and had increased risk for a range of physical and mental health challenges. These findings highlight how early experiences can influence development across a person's lifespan and reinforce the importance of creating safe, supportive and nurturing environments that promote resilience and healthy development.

It is important to recognize that the ways children cope with adversity are often adaptive responses that help them survive overwhelming experiences. While these strategies may have served a protective purpose in the past, they can also place students at greater risk for physical, emotional, social or academic difficulties.



Behaviours such as aggression, withdrawal, emotional numbing, risk-taking or hypervigilance are often attempts to manage distress rather than signs of defiance, overachievement or a 'lack of motivation.' Understanding these behaviours through a trauma-sensitive lens allows staff to respond with compassion and support, thus helping students develop safer and more effective ways of coping over time.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the effect of trauma on an individual can be conceptualized as a normal response to an abnormal situation. More recent research has added to this foundational work with a focus on Positive Childhood Experiences. Here, the lens has been turned toward factors that enhance wellness and resilience in childhood and may counterbalance the impact of childhood adversities. Of factors studied, healthy school environments and peer support, along with neighbourhood safety, appear to have the greatest protective effects in relation to later adult outcomes, especially mental health. These effects are maintained even in the presence of ACEs, suggesting a role in resilience-building. Such findings further highlight the importance of social connection and creating and sustaining mentally healthy, trauma-sensitive school settings.

Brain development

Childhood trauma can significantly influence brain development, particularly when stress is intense, prolonged or occurs without the buffering support of a caring adult. Repeated activation of the body's stress response can affect areas of the brain responsible for emotional regulation, attention, memory, decision-making and executive functioning. As a result, students may be more likely to react from a 'survival brain' rather than an engaged 'learning brain.' Trauma-sensitive environments that emphasize safety, predictability, positive relationships and regulation can help support healthy brain development and learning.

School staff play an important role in helping students understand that their brain and body are responding in ways that were designed to protect them from perceived danger. By normalizing these survival responses and responding with empathy rather than judgment, school staff can reduce shame and help students develop self-awareness. When students are calm and regulated, staff can work collaboratively with students and families to build identity-affirming coping strategies that reflect their strengths, culture and preferences. These skills increase a student's sense of safety, connection and readiness to learn.

Understanding that behaviours are often adaptive responses to trauma is an important part of healing for students and families. When stress responses become overwhelming, students need caring adults who can co-regulate with them, strengthen their coping skills and create environments where they feel safe enough to learn, grow and thrive. School settings that inspire positive social connection help to nurture positive childhood experiences and related emotional wellness.

Impact of trauma on learning and cognition

Trauma can interfere with the cognitive skills students need to learn effectively. Difficulties with attention, concentration, working memory, processing speed, organization, problem-solving and flexible thinking are common. Students may appear distracted, forgetful and disengaged when, in fact, their brains are prioritizing safety over learning. Consistent routines, clear expectations and supportive, identity-affirming relationships help create the conditions for students to re-engage in learning.



Impact of trauma on social-emotional skills

Trauma can affect a student's ability to recognize, express and regulate emotions, build trusting relationships and navigate social interactions. Some students may become highly reactive, while others withdraw or appear emotionally disconnected. They may struggle with conflict resolution, empathy or interpreting social cues. Trauma-sensitive schools intentionally teach and model emotional regulation, foster positive relationships and create opportunities for students to build resilience and a sense of belonging.

Impact of trauma on identity

Traumatic experiences can shape how students see themselves, others and the world around them. Children who have experienced adversity may develop beliefs such as 'I'm not safe,' 'I'm not good enough,' or 'I don't matter.' These beliefs can affect confidence, motivation, relationships and willingness to take healthy risks in learning. School environments that are identity-affirming support students in developing a more positive sense of self, agency and hope for the future.

Oppression and trauma: understanding the connection

Trauma does not occur in isolation from the broader social context. Oppression creates and contributes to the conditions for trauma. Experiences of racism, colonialism and oppression can create chronic stress and increase exposure to traumatic experiences while limiting access to safety, support and opportunity. These experiences can have cumulative effects on a student's well-being, sense of belonging, identity and ability to engage in learning. A trauma-sensitive approach recognizes the impact of systemic inequities and intentionally creates inclusive, culturally responsive and identity-affirming environments where every student feels valued, respected and safe to learn.

- **Oppression is a chronic stressor.** Racism, colonialism, ableism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, poverty and other forms of systemic oppression expose individuals and communities to ongoing threat, exclusion and harm, negatively impacting safety, inclusion and access to supports for particular individuals and communities.
- **Trauma can be individual and collective.** Oppression produces **individual trauma** (e.g., repeated discrimination, hyper-surveillance, violence) and **collective or historical trauma** (e.g., communities impacted by colonization, slavery, residential schools). "Collective trauma is the psychological and social impact of a traumatic event or series of events that affects a group, community, or society, disrupting shared experiences of safety, connection, identity, trust, and meaning. Its effects can extend beyond individuals to the social fabric of the community and may persist across time and generations" (Hirschberger, 2018).
- School and system leaders have opportunities to make intentional decisions about policies, programming, events and resource allocation that acknowledge and respond to collective trauma. Recognizing the ongoing impacts of historical and systemic oppression – particularly the intergenerational trauma experienced by First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples, much of which occurred within educational institutions – can inform meaningful action toward Reconciliation, equity and the implementation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action.
- **Cumulative and intergenerational effects.** Repeated exposure over time – and across generations – can dysregulate stress responses, shape identity and belonging and impact mental health, education and well-being.
- **Systems can retraumatize.** Schools, healthcare and justice systems can perpetuate harm through punitive, exclusionary or culturally unsafe practices.



What can trauma responses look like at school? How can school staff help?

As a system or school leader, your understanding of how trauma can show up in schools and classrooms is essential to supporting the staff who work directly with students. Your role is to help educators and other school staff look beyond a student's actions and recognize that what may appear as 'opposition,' disengagement, overachievement or difficulty with regulation may be a student's response to stress, adversity or a need for safety. By supporting staff to respond with calm, compassion, curiosity and consistency, you help create the conditions for students to feel safe, regulate their emotions, strengthen coping skills and re-engage in learning. This can enhance a student's positive childhood experience, which can produce lasting outcomes for their well-being.

This chart outlines some of the common trauma responses from students in school settings and some trauma-sensitive responses that school leaders and other school staff can be encouraged to use to help a student feel safe, connected and calm.

Common trauma responses in school settings	Trauma-sensitive responses by school staff
Stress and survival responses (fight, flight, freeze or collapse/faint)	• Build trusting relationships that help you anticipate needs and respond early. • Teach and practice coping and distress tolerance skills. • Offer choices whenever possible to increase a sense of control. • Consistently communicate clear, consistent and predictable boundaries. • Identify and reduce triggers where possible. • Use co-regulation before expecting self-regulation.
Frequent dysregulation, emotional outbursts or aggression	• Maintain predictable routines and prepare students for changes. • Watch for early signs of distress and intervene before behaviours escalate. • Learn the student's unique cues and triggers and develop a proactive support plan together. • Offer reassurance, encouragement and specific praise. • Remember that the student's brain may be responding to a perceived threat, even when the environment appears safe.
Controlling, attention-seeking or 'manipulative' behaviours	• Ask, 'What need is this behaviour communicating?' rather than 'How do I stop it?' • Recognize these behaviours as survival strategies that may once have helped the student stay safe. • Build trust through consistency, empathy and relationship. • Identify and reinforce the student's strengths.
Difficulty showing empathy or building healthy relationships	• Model respectful, attuned relationships. • Explicitly teach social-emotional skill development, perspective-taking, conflict resolution and repair. • Create opportunities for belonging, collaboration and positive peer interactions.



Common trauma responses in school settings	Trauma-sensitive responses by school staff
Inconsistent learning, memory and concentration	• Understand that stress can interfere with attention, working memory and retrieval of previously learned information. • Re-teach concepts without shame and adjust expectations based on the student's current capacity. • Break tasks into manageable steps and provide scaffolds and repetition.
Absenteeism, school avoidance or disengagement	• Begin with connection before correction. • Be curious about barriers rather than assuming a lack of engagement. • Build on the student's interests and strengths to increase engagement. • Work collaboratively with the student, family and support staff to reduce barriers to attendance and participation.

What you do matters

Trauma-sensitive schools recognize that behaviour is communication and that students' thoughts, emotions and actions are shaped by their experiences, relationships, identities and environments.

By understanding the impact of trauma on brain development, learning, emotional regulation, relationships and identity, school and system leaders can create safe, predictable, inclusive and identity-affirming learning environments where every student can heal, build resilience and thrive. Through compassionate leadership, strong relationships and intentional policies and practices, schools can enhance positive childhood experiences, reduce barriers to learning and foster well-being, belonging and success for all students.

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