

# TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE



## What it is

Trauma-informed practice (also known as trauma-sensitive practice or safe and supportive schools) is about creating a school culture where every student feels safe and supported. This whole-school approach uses the lens of trauma to inform school practices and activities in order to avoid inadvertently threatening the emotional safety of students who may have experienced trauma.

## Why schools might choose to focus on trauma-informed practice

When school communities are aware of the frequency of traumatic experiences in the lives of their students, they are more likely to commit to this approach.

When the school community is dealing with extremes of student behaviour, from withdrawal to aggressive acting out, trauma-informed practice can provide a stable supportive environment for helping students learn to regulate emotions and interact positively with others.

“ 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. ”

Dr. Stuart Shankar

## Key understandings

- At least one-quarter of the students in any given school have experienced traumatic or adverse experiences.
- Students who have been exposed to unpredictable and uncontrollable danger live much of their lives in survival mode and respond to the world as a place of danger.
- When students experience this kind of frequent or prolonged adversity the resulting stress can undermine their ability to cope.
- No two individuals are impacted by a similar adverse event in the same way.
- Positive relationships and successful experiences in school can buffer the impact of past adverse experiences.

## Key components

- A shared understanding of how trauma impacts learning and social, emotional and physical development.
- A structured and supportive learning environment that creates predictability and a sense of safety.
- Supported opportunities to develop healthy relationships with adults and peers.
- Structured opportunities for social-emotional learning.
- Clear behavioural expectations with logical and predictable consequences that support students by teaching them positive replacement behavior.
- Shared responsibility amongst all staff for the success of all students.



## How trauma-informed practice supports welcoming, caring, respectful and safe environments

Trauma-informed practice provides a useful lens for selecting and refining strategies and activities that will contribute to a more supportive learning environment. Focusing on positive relationships, clear behavioural expectations, and skills to identify and manage emotions will reduce barriers to learning, enhance learner engagement for all students and improve and enrich school culture.

## How trauma-informed practice supports inclusion

All students benefit from trauma-informed practice, since all students benefit from learning environments that are calm, predictable, supportive and positive.

Individual students who have experienced trauma may demonstrate behaviours, ranging from extreme withdrawal to aggression, which interfere with their relationships and participation in learning. Trauma-informed practice can be the first step in providing the support they need to be more successful learners.

## How collaboration and community partnerships can enhance trauma-informed practice in schools

A school-wide focus on trauma-informed practice creates shared understanding, a common language, and identifies specific strategies that adults can use to support students across environments at school, at home and in the community.

Collaborating with and tapping into the expertise of community partners and service providers can be an effective way to build school staff capacity to better support students who have experienced trauma. In addition, some students may require mental health supports and services beyond what the school staff can provide. Community service providers may have the expertise and resources to provide this support.

“SO OFTEN, TRAUMA HAPPENS IN RELATIONSHIPS, BUT IT IS ALSO IN RELATIONSHIPS THAT HEALING OCCURS.”

Dr. Bruce Perry



## Examples of what trauma-informed practice might look like

The following composite stories are designed to help illustrate what trauma-informed practice could look like; these examples are just a single snapshot from the myriad of possibilities.

### Example A

Staff at a large urban school are focusing on building predictable and supportive routines throughout the school day. Working with a district psychologist, the school offered a professional development series to build staff capacity for helping students learn to regulate their emotions and develop healthy relationships with both peers and adults.

### Example B

At the beginning of the year staff participated in professional development looking at how trauma impacts the lives of students. Using the lens of trauma, staff are reviewing school and classroom policies, ranging from homework to codes of conduct, to ensure the most supportive practices are in place.

### Example C

A senior high school is using a student advisory model to ensure that every student in the school has at least one caring adult that they can turn to for support. An advisory group of teachers and leaders also reviewed school practices to ensure they aligned with trauma-informed practice. Dedicated time at monthly staff meetings focuses on sharing and discussing strategies for creating a more supportive learning environment.

## Evidence-base for trauma-informed practice

Trauma-informed practice originated in mental health therapies. The principles of the practice were extended to educational settings to provide students with embedded supports throughout the school day.

The key research on trauma-informed practice for schools is being led by the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, a collaboration of the Massachusetts Advocates for Children and Harvard Law School. In addition to the comprehensive information shared on their website, they have developed two authoritative resources, *Helping Traumatized Children Learn and Creating and Advocating for Trauma Sensitive Schools*. These resources document the effects of trauma on children's development and learning, and offer strategies for creating supportive learning environments and practices that help students regulate their behavior, identify feelings, and develop healthy relationships.

## Questions for reflection and discussion

- How would you describe your school staff's current understanding of the effects of trauma on learning? Is this a topic of conversation and interest for your school? Why or why not?
- What are you already doing in your school that supports trauma-informed practice?
- What expertise and resources are available at the school and school authority level to support implementation of trauma-informed practices? What expertise and resources are available in the community?

# FOR MORE INFORMATION

## Alberta Education

### What is Trauma-Informed Practice?

This six-minute explanatory [video](#) and accompanying [conversation guide](#) is part of a series created to build a shared understanding of welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments. Related [links](#) are also provided.

## PolicyWise for Children & Families

### Supporting Every Student Learning Series

In collaboration with Alberta Education, PolicyWise for Children & Families created three [presentations](#) and related conversation guides on trauma-informed practice for schools.

## Alberta Family Wellness Initiative

### How Brains Are Built: The Core Story of Brain Development

This four-minute explanatory [video](#) presents the science of toxic stress and brain development, key concepts for understanding the effects of trauma.