



Principles of a Trauma-Informed Approach

Teachers and school staff can enhance the protective factors in a child's life and help our schools become trauma-informed. According to the Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) there are six key principles of a trauma-informed approach, including safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice and choice; and cultural, historical, and gender issues. It's important to note that these are good approaches for *all* students, regardless of trauma history, but may be especially important for children who have experienced trauma.



SAFETY

It's important for both staff and students to feel physically and emotionally safe. For that to happen both the environment and the interactions in the classroom should feel safe. This can happen, in many ways, for example: before making changes to the classroom environment, like turning off the lights or making a loud sound, let your students know what is about to happen.

TRUSTWORTHINESS AND TRANSPARENCY

Trust and transparency are essential. Teachers can foster trust with students by demonstrating mutual respect and by communicating clear, consistent, and predictable rules and routines in the classroom. Transparency with students can also help build a sense of trust in the classroom. Students may come to teachers for information about stressful events in their lives or in the community. It is important for teachers to be transparent and provide simple, realistic, and developmentally appropriate answers to their questions.

PEER SUPPORT

Peer support and mutual self-help can be critical in helping students feel safe in the classroom. They can also be important methods for building trust and collaboration to encourage recovery and healing. One way to encourage peer support in the classroom is to hold classroom discussions that encourage students to share how they support each other or how they like to receive support when

they're upset. Additionally, we can have conversations about how others in their family ask for and receive support, what might be scary about asking for help, and how can we make that easier.

COLLABORATION AND MUTUALITY

Much of healing trauma can happen in relationships through shared power and decision-making. Even though teachers aren't therapists, they have strong relationships with their students and can be a major source of this healing. This can include making sure students know their feelings are valid, even if they don't seem rational as an adult. Teachers can offer empathy and understanding for students who may be experiencing distrust and distress due to trauma. It's important to validate and honor students' experiences and the emotions attached to them and avoid trying to convince students that they shouldn't feel the way they do.

EMPOWERMENT, VOICE, AND CHOICE

Traumatic events can make students feel a sense of chaos or like they have lost control. You can help students feel safe and secure by offering choices or control in the classroom. One way to do this is by allowing students to choose their seat. Similarly, you can provide students the opportunity to choose their own activities during recess or free time in the classroom. You can also encourage students to lead activities that can teach them leadership skills through action while also allowing them to be creative and have their voices heard.

CULTURAL, HISTORICAL, AND GENDER ISSUES

It may be possible to help heal trauma, particularly historical trauma, through the valuing of traditional cultural connections. This can include policies, protocols, and processes that respond to the racial, ethnic, and cultural needs of individual students. For example, across many topics, you may have the opportunity to create space in your classroom for the discussion of identity, including cultural, racial, and gender identity, and how it impacts your students' everyday experiences. This can be integrated into existing curriculum in various ways, from discussing a wide range of diverse books to acknowledging the achievements of scientists from minority backgrounds.

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).

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