

# TRAUMA-INFORMED EDUCATION: HELPING EDUCATORS RECOGNIZE AND INTERVENE IN CHILDHOOD TRAUMA



Identifying when children have experienced a traumatic event is difficult because behaviors that could indicate trauma range greatly. For example, boys are more likely to exhibit externalizing symptoms overall for all mental health conditions, and girls are more likely to experience internalizing symptoms.

Sometimes, children often mask emotional pain by exhibiting potentially negative or disruptive behaviors<sup>[1]</sup>. If those behaviors are significant or persistent, they could be a sign of a potential underlying trauma.

By being able to identify potential childhood trauma, educators may better understand these confusing behaviors and empower them to intervene in a positive, possibly life-changing way.

Childhood trauma is more pervasive than most people think. According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, more than twenty-five percent of young people in America experience trauma before age sixteen. And, due to the vulnerability surrounding age and dependence of children, twenty-five percent of those victims will go on to develop post-traumatic stress, depression, and/or anxiety disorders.<sup>[2]</sup>

## CAUSES OF TRAUMA

Many types of childhood adversities can lead to trauma, including experiencing at least one or more adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood. These include, but are not limited to experiencing and witnessing violence, abuse or neglect or living in an unstable household, perhaps with a parent who has a substance abuse or other mental health condition or is incarcerated.<sup>[3]</sup> Beyond ACEs, other types of traumatic events can include surviving a natural disaster, sudden loss of a loved one, serious accidents, refugee or war experiences and military family-related stressors.<sup>[4]</sup>

## WHY IDENTIFYING TRAUMA MATTERS

Without treatment, repeated childhood exposure to traumatic events can affect the brain and nervous system and increase health-risk behaviors, as well as the likelihood for long-term health problems.<sup>[5]</sup> Traumatic stress can also lead to increased use of health and mental health services and increased involvement with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.<sup>[6]</sup> Researchers agree that trauma negatively impacts learning and can often be misidentified as ADHD, or vice versa.

## POTENTIAL SIGNS OF TRAUMA

- Overreactions to everyday challenges
- Negative outbursts or aggression
- Frequent stomachaches or headaches
- Appearing very sad
- Extreme shyness and challenges engaging with others
- Inappropriate social interactions
- Trouble organizing, focusing or self-regulating
- Falling behind in classwork/missing school

According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network<sup>[7]</sup> many children, especially in a preschool environment, exhibit behaviors that are nearly identical to those with developmental delays, ADHD, and other mental health conditions. Recognizing behaviors such as lack of developmental progress, statements about death and dying, or even over-reacting to bright lighting and sudden movements can indicate trauma.<sup>[8]</sup>

## IN COLLABORATION WITH



THE JUSTICE SYSTEM  
AND MENTAL HEALTH

1. <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-2458-13-628> 2. <https://www.samhsa.gov/child-trauma/understanding-child-trauma> 3. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/fastfact.html> 4. [www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/about-child-trauma](https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/about-child-trauma). 5. [www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/about-child-trauma](https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/about-child-trauma). 6. <https://www.samhsa.gov/child-trauma/understanding-child-trauma> 7. <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline/warning-signs-risk-factors> 8. <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/it-adhd-or-child-traumatic-stress-guide-clinicians>

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## HOW YOU CAN HELP: FOSTER TRAUMA-INFORMED SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS

Your reaction to a child who may be exhibiting potential signs of trauma, can have a huge impact on not only their success in school but also the trajectory of their life. In fact, promoting trauma-informed learning approaches benefit all children, regardless of their trauma history, and can improve behavior, reduce suspensions and expulsions, and improve academic achievement.

Better understanding of why it is important to identify trauma, and what those signs are, can help you develop an informed approach to teaching and interacting with students. Trauma-informed teaching considers how trauma can affect behavior and learning so that you can implement strategies that help your students.



## TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH FOR EDUCATORS

Following are helpful tips for utilizing a trauma-informed approach when necessary.

-  Understand that students will overreact at times; provide the time and space they need to calm down.
-  Provide writing or other creative outlets for students to express their experiences. Understanding their unique situations can help you react with empathy.
-  Establish safe spaces in the classroom where children can calm down and process their emotions
-  Do not take students' behaviors personally. Behavior is a form of communication.
-  Communicate with families about what you are seeing in the classroom.
-  Teach and model positive behavior.
-  Be mindful of and manage your own emotions.
-  Involve the school counselor or other mental health professionals as necessary, and always be sure to follow your school protocols and especially state mandates for reporting and other measures.

Additionally, it's important to let the administration at your school know if one of your students has experienced trauma. It is critical that they also support these trauma informed practices outside of the traditional classroom setting.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: [www.nctsn.org](http://www.nctsn.org)

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

Behavioral Health Treatment Locator: [findtreatment.samhsa.gov](http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov)

The Jed Foundation: [jedfoundation.org/](http://jedfoundation.org/)

American Psychiatric Association: [www.psychiatry.org/](http://www.psychiatry.org/)

1. <https://bmcpublichealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-2458-13-628> 2. <https://www.samhsa.gov/child-trauma/understanding-child-trauma> 3. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/fastfact.html> 4. <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/about-child-trauma>. 5. <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/about-child-trauma>. 6. <https://www.samhsa.gov/child-trauma/understanding-child-trauma> 7. <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/disaster-distress-helpline/warning-signs-risk-factors> 8. <https://www.nctsn.org/resources/it-adhd-or-child-traumatic-stress-guide-clinicians>