Trauma Informed Approaches in Schools: Universal Practices to Address Mental Health

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Four Agreements of a Courageous Conversation

• Stay Engaged
• Speak your truth
• Experience discomfort
• Expect and accept non-closure

(Singelton & Linton, 2006)
Trauma Definition: Act 18 of 2019

1. Exposure to an event, series of events or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening.

2. Lasting adverse effects

3. Creates significant difficulty in cognitive functioning and physical, social, emotional, mental or spiritual well-being.
Trauma-Informed Care Values

- Safety
- Trustworthiness
- Collaboration & Mutuality
- Empowerment, Choice & Voice
- Cultural Sensitivity
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WELCOME
Physiological Safety

“Anything that has an impact on kids’ bodies can ultimately translate to the emotional climate of the classroom.”

- Bluestein
Academic safety is about the adult’s willingness to stimulate and encourage students by accepting them where they are without ridicule.

“Real education should consist of drawing the goodness and the best out of our own students.”

- Cesar Chavez
Emotional safety is being able to share feelings both positive and negative in an atmosphere of trust without repercussions.
**Social Safety**

Educational communities are seeking clarity around the purpose, intention, and need for equity, inclusion, and belonging in educational spaces. This information is provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Education to help address perceptions and offer clarity on equitable practices in education.

### Equity

**Perception**
- Equity, inclusion, and belonging is only for urban educational spaces with diverse populations.

**Clarity**
- Equity, inclusion, and belonging helps create access, opportunity, and a healthy learning environment for ALL learners, regardless of demographic (urban, rural, suburban). Educational communities include people of varying lived experiences who have diverse needs and a variety of strengths.

### Inclusion

**Perception**
- Equity, inclusion, and belonging is another way of promoting Critical Race Theory.

**Clarity**
- Critical Race Theory is not part of or taught in any state required curriculum. Equity, inclusion, and belonging in education helps create spaces for ALL learners and staff to be their authentic selves. Discussions about cultures and identities in education are important to ensure equitable access for ALL learners.

### Belonging

**Perception**
- Equity, inclusion, and belonging is only about funding.

**Clarity**
- Equitable funding is an important consideration to ensure fair access and opportunity for students across Pennsylvania. Funding is one part of the process to create healthy learning environments—but it cannot shift systems in isolation.

**Perception**
- Equity, inclusion, and belonging suggests that I am not a good person or that my education system is bad.

**Clarity**
- It is important to understand who we are as we interact with others. Self-Awareness, one of the PDE equity skills of practice, invites people to explore and reflect upon their own thoughts, ideas, and beliefs. Self-awareness supports how to engage in healthy relationships with people of diverse backgrounds—but it is not intended to encourage guilt, shame, or hopelessness. Discussing equity, inclusion, and belonging may be uncomfortable; however, it is important to ensure we can engage with individuals, families, and communities who are different from us.

**Perception**
- Equity, inclusion, and belonging does not allow for diverse viewpoints.

**Clarity**
- Diverse viewpoints are an important part of our democracy and help our nation thrive. Equity, inclusion, and belonging help create the conditions for civil dialogues to occur. Equity in voice, inclusion of different perspectives, and honoring the lived experiences of others is a vital part of preparing youth for global citizenship, as well as a global workforce and marketplace.
Behavioral Safety

- Behavioral safety exists when the relationship between the student and adult is not power-based

- Safe and acceptable behaviors are taught

- Punishment is not used to change behaviors
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Prevalence and Impact of ACEs
Early Adversity has Lasting Impacts

Adverse Childhood Experiences

- Traumatic Brain Injury
- Fractures
- Burns

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Suicide
- PTSD

- Unintended pregnancy
- Pregnancy complications
- Fetal death

- HIV
- STDs

- Cancer
- Diabetes

- Alcohol & Drug Abuse
- Unsafe Sex

- Education
- Occupation
- Income

- Risky Behaviors

- Chronic Disease
- Infectious Disease
- Mental Health
- Physical Health

- Opportunities
Prevalence of ACEs

Figure 1: Prevalence (%) Estimates (N=5,705) of Individual ACEs in Pennsylvania, 2016

Prevalence of Individual ACEs, 2016

- Emotional Abuse: 35%
- Separated or Divorced: 25%
- Alcohol Abuse: 23%
- Mental Illness: 19%
- Witnessed Domestic Violence: 16%
- Physical Abuse: 16%
- Drug Abuse: 11%
- Touched by Someone 5+ Years Older: 10%
- Incarcerated Household Member: 8%
- Forced to Touch Someone 5+ Years Older: 7%
- Forced Into Sex with Someone 5+ Years Older: 4%

Abuse
Household Dysfunction
Prevalence (%)

Pennsylvania Department of Education
ACE Score

Percentage of Respondents Reporting ACEs.

- Zero ACEs: 51
- 1 or more ACE: 13
- 4 or more ACEs: 49

PA DOH: 2016 ACE Study
## Community Level Adversity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Witness Violence – 40.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td>How often, if ever, did you see or hear someone being beat up, stabbed, or shot in real life?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felt Discrimination – 34.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td>While you were growing up…How often did you feel that you were treated badly or unfairly because of your race or ethnicity?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adverse Neighborhood Experience – 27.3%</td>
<td></td>
<td>Did you feel safe in your neighborhood? Did you feel people in your neighborhood looked out for each other, stood up for each other, and could be trusted?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bullied – 7.9%</td>
<td></td>
<td>How often were you bullied by a peer or classmate?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lived in Foster Care- 2.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td>Were you ever in foster care?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Philadelphia ACEs Study*
The Pair of ACEs

Adverse Childhood Experiences

- Maternal Depression
- Physical & Emotional Neglect
- Emotional & Sexual Abuse
- Divorce
- Substance Abuse
- Mental Illness
- Domestic Violence
- Incarceration
- Homelessness

Adverse Community Environments

- Poverty
- Violence
- Discrimination
- Community Disruption
- Lack of Opportunity, Economic Mobility & Social Capital
- Poor Housing Quality & Affordability

## ACEs in the Classroom

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In the past 12 months...</th>
<th>2015</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Risk Factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family History of Antisocial Behavior</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
<td>30.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Conflict</td>
<td>35.3%</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Attitudes Favorable Toward Drug Use</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
<td>32.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor Family Management</td>
<td>37.3%</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Protective Factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Attachment</td>
<td>63.2%</td>
<td>62.9%</td>
<td>62.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rewards for Prosocial Involvement</td>
<td>53.9%</td>
<td>51.9%</td>
<td>48.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACEs and School Performance

- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)
- Depression
- Asthma
- Kidney disease
- Stroke
- Coronary heart disease
- Cancer

- Diabetes
- Overweight/obesity
- Heavy drinking
- Smoking
- Unemployment
- Suicide attempts
- High-risk sexual behavior

CDC: ACE Health Outcomes
What can educators do?
Impact of Trauma

- Trauma exposure vs. trauma impact
- Universal precautions: building positive learning environments
How Do We Respond to Stress?
THE STRESS RESPONSE SYSTEM

Neocortex

Limbic System

Brainstem

“Thinking brain”

“Emotional brain”

(Guarino, K. & Chagnon, E. 2018)
The Stress Response System

1. The amygdala senses threat and sets off the alarm.
2. Thinking brain assesses the situation.
3. Thinking brain goes off-line. Emotional brain activates fight or flight response.
4. Thinking brain helps shut off the alarm and helps us to calm down.

(Combatino, K. & Chagnon, E. 2018)
The Stress Response System

- An experience becomes TRAUMATIC when it overwhelms our system for responding to stress.
- The emotional brain continues to sound the alarm and send messages to fight or flee, even after the threat has passed.

(Guarino, K. & Chagnon, E. 2018)
Trauma & Brain Development

Adapted from Holt & Jordan, Ohio Dept. of Education
Common Responses to Trauma

**School-Age Children**

- Fear, anxiety, worry
- Feelings of guilt, shame, and self-blame
- Headaches, stomachaches
- Nightmares, disrupted sleep
- Difficulty concentrating
- Angry outbursts, aggression, and withdrawal
- Over- or under-reactions to situations in the environment (e.g., sudden movements, loud noises, physical contact)

(Guarino, K. & Chagnon, E. 2018)
Common Responses to Trauma

Adolescents

- Fear, anxiety, worry
- Concerns about how others will view them after the event
- Shame, guilt, responsibility, embarrassment
- Withdrawal from family, peers, activities
- Avoid reminders of the event
- More intense mood swings
- Decline in school performance
- Increase in risk-taking behaviors (e.g., alcohol/drug use, sexual behaviors, fights, self-harm)

(Guarino, K. & Chagnon, E. 2018)
What Does This Mean for Schools?
Impact of Trauma on Students, Parents, Staff and Schools | Trauma-Sensitive Schools: A Universal Response
What is a Trauma-Informed Approach?

1. Includes a school-wide approach to education and a classroom-based approach to student learning
2. Recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma
3. Responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, professional learning, procedures and practices
4. Purposes of recognizing the presence and onset of trauma, resisting the reoccurrence of trauma and promoting resiliency tailored to a school entity’s culture, climate and demographics and the community as a whole.
Impact of Trauma on Students

- Difficulty paying attention and learning
- More time out of the classroom
- Increased isolation
- School absences
- More suspensions or expulsions
- Higher referral rates to special education
- Poor test scores and an increased risk of failing grades
Impact of Trauma on Parents/Guardians

• Difficulty managing emotions and controlling behaviors when interacting with school staff
• Difficulty forming relationships
• Increased risk for substance abuse, depression, and PTSD that negatively impact parenting
• Trouble managing stress related to their child’s difficult behaviors
• Feelings of embarrassment, shame, fear, or guilt about their child’s behaviors or needs
• Difficulty helping their children cope
Impact of Trauma on Staff

- Increased anxiety
- Reduced energy and focus
- Trouble regulating emotions
- Difficulty managing responses to students and parents
- Diminished capacity to maintain positive teacher-student and teacher-parent relationships
- Poor attendance or work performance
Impact Of Trauma On Schools

- Students more likely to escalate
- Adults more reactive, controlling, and punitive
- Negative impact on school safety and culture
- Increased risk for harm
- Decrease in academic achievement
MTSS as a Guiding Framework

Key Areas:
Academics
Assessment and screening
Behavioral supports
Cognitive skills
Community partnerships
Crisis prevention and response
Educator capacity
Emotional and physiological regulation
Environment, culture, climate
Leadership
Parent and caregiver involvement
Policies
Relationships
Social-emotional learning
Guiding Questions for Policy and Procedures

- Discipline
- Communication
- Safety
Positive Learning Environment
Building Blocks of Positive Learning Environments

Engagement
- Relationships
- Respect for Diversity
- School Participation

Safety
- Emotional Safety
- Physical Safety
- Substance Use

Environment
- Physical Environment
- Academic Environment
- Wellness
- Disciplinary Environment

National School Mental Health Curriculum, 2018
Trauma-Informed Physical School Environment

Supports all students impacted by trauma and toxic stress by:

- Designing all physical aspects of the school to set a tone for positive learning environments by being physically welcoming, comfortable, and safe
- Including the signage and messaging, visual look of all areas
- Reminding all about the importance of each member of the community and how to interact
Resources

- PDE: Equitable Practices Hub
- PDE: Empowerment Through Common Language in Pennsylvania: A Dictionary of Terms Related to Trauma-Informed Approaches in Schools
- Social and Emotional Wellness Resources for Families
- PDE–SEL Best Practice Resources
- PDE Safe Schools Website
References

- Kirwan Institute Implicit Bias Training Module Series
  [http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/implicit-bias-training/](http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/implicit-bias-training/)
  [https://www.education.pa.gov/Schools/safeschools/equityandinclusion/EPH/Pages/default.aspx](https://www.education.pa.gov/Schools/safeschools/equityandinclusion/EPH/Pages/default.aspx)
For more information on resources or education related to Trauma-Informed Approaches please visit PDE’s website at www.education.pa.gov.

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