

CONVERSATION GUIDE

Trauma-Informed Practice

Part 1. An Introduction to Trauma-Informed Practice in Schools

(with Margaret Casey, Calgary Board of Education)

Understanding how trauma can impact students' learning and development supports the creation of welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments.

Key understandings: *What is trauma-informed practice?*

- Trauma-informed practice is different from trauma-specific interventions. Trauma-specific interventions are treatments for trauma through therapeutic interventions involving practitioners with specific skills such as social workers, mental health therapists or psychologists.
- Trauma-informed practice is a school-wide approach in which all adults in the school are aware of how trauma impacts learning, and are committed to practices and relationships that support safety and collaboration and reduce the negative effects of trauma.
- Trauma-informed practice builds on:
 - awareness of how trauma affects the brain and the body
 - understanding the importance of safety in the school environment
 - willingness to collaborate with others.
- Trauma-informed practice represents a shift in thinking from “What is wrong with this student?” to “What has happened to this student?”
- Becoming trauma-informed involves a gradual integration of trauma concepts and trauma-sensitive responses into daily practice.
- Trauma-informed practice can vary across school settings, depending on the needs and experience of students, the school context, and the priorities and resources of the school community.
- Trauma-informed practice is an extension of the art and science of good teaching practice.
- Using a trauma-lens means considering the context of behaviours, suspending judgement, moving from a punitive approach and responding with supports and strategies that help students feel safe, supported and valued.

The impact of trauma and toxic stress

- Trauma may arise from a single or repeated adverse event that can interfere with a person's ability to cope and to integrate the experience; it is the experience (or witnessing) of a real or perceived threat to life, physical well-being or sense of self.
- Impacts of traumatic experiences can be cumulative across the lifespan.

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The impact of trauma and toxic stress (cont.)

- Traumatic experience can impair an individual's:
 - attachment to others
 - biology (brain and body)
 - emotional regulation
 - ability to focus and make connections
 - behavioural control
 - cognition (thinking and learning)
 - self-concept.
- Students who have experienced trauma may arrive at school with:
 - expectations that others will harm them
 - difficulty forming relationships
 - difficulty managing, understanding and regulating feelings and behaviour,
 - damaged or fragmented sense of self,
 - developmental gaps, including problem-solving abilities, academic performance and ability to make healthy decisions.
- Students who have experienced trauma are more likely to:
 - be clingy or appear needy
 - appear manipulative or controlling
 - engage in avoidance or withdrawal behaviours
 - be confrontive and hostile
 - complain of illness such as stomach aches, headaches and sleep problems.
- The body's alarm system has three main survival responses: fight, flight, or freeze.
- In school, these responses can manifest in a range of behaviours, including:
 - *Fight*: hyperactivity, verbal aggression, oppositional behaviour, limit testing, physical aggression, 'bouncing off the walls'
 - *Flight*: withdrawal, escaping, running away, self-isolation, avoidance
 - *Freeze*: wariness and watchfulness, daydreaming, forgetfulness, over-compliance, shutting down emotionally, inability to make a decision
- There are three types of stress, including:
 - *Positive*: brief increase in heart rate, mild elevations in stress hormone levels
 - *Tolerable*: serious, temporary stress responses, buffered by supportive relationships
 - *Toxic*: prolonged activation of stress response systems in absence of protective relationships.
- Adverse childhood experiences resulting in toxic stress are the most basic, long-lasting cause of health, risk behaviours, mental illness, social difficulties, disease, disability, death, and health-care costs.

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The impact of trauma and toxic stress (cont.)

- Adverse childhood experiences include physical, verbal and sexual abuse; physical and emotional neglect; and proximity to family members with untreated mental illness, addiction, or who are incarcerated.
- An Alberta survey identified that one half of Alberta adults experienced family dysfunction and almost one third experienced abuse.
- Student's health, behaviour, ability to learn, and core biology, are directly affected by adverse and traumatic childhood experiences.
- The more adverse childhood experiences an individual student has, the more likely they are to be late or absent, referred for discipline, be suspended and have fewer career aspirations and goals.
- Understanding the impact of trauma on learning, and applying trauma-informed practices involves a shift in the way educators and educational staff think about students and student behaviour.

To learn more about the effects of adverse childhood experiences, see Dr. Nadine Burke Harris's TED Talk at:

https://www.ted.com/talks/nadine_burke_harris_how_childhood_trauma_affects_health_across_a_lifetime?language=en

Related videos in the *Supporting Every Student Learning Series*:

[*Brain Development*](#), with Dr. Nicole Sherren

[*Essential Elements for Building Trauma-Sensitive Schools*](#), with Mardi Bernard

Questions for reflection and discussion:

- How would you describe your 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?
- Do you see behaviours in the current school environment that may be a result of the fight, flight or freeze survival response? How can we reduce the incidence of these types of behaviours?
- What are you already doing in your school that supports trauma-informed practice?

For more information:

- See Alberta Education's [resources on trauma-informed practices](#), including a [video](#), [conversation guide](#), and [external links](#).