

## CONVERSATION GUIDE

### **Trauma-Informed Practice**

#### **Part 3: Essential Elements for Building Trauma-Sensitive Schools**

(with Mardi Bernard, School Mental Health Nurse)

*Safe and supportive learning environments can help students overcome some of the adverse effects of trauma.*

#### **Key understandings:**

- Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) refer to the most intensive and frequently occurring sources of stress that children may experience early in life, including abuse; neglect; alcohol or substance abuse by family members; and violence in the family or community.
- The [Adverse Childhood Experiences Study](#) looked at the health outcomes of over 17,000 adults who provided detailed information about their experiences of childhood abuse, neglect and family dysfunction.
- According to the study, adverse childhood experiences are much more common than expected. Six out of 10 children have endured a childhood trauma.
- People who experienced five or more adverse childhood experiences had significantly higher levels of behaviour and learning disorders that affected their success in school.
- Experiencing trauma in the early years affects parts of the brain that are set for survival, causing individuals to switch to survival mode when it is unnecessary or counter-productive.
- As educators we may never know which specific students experienced what type or level of early childhood trauma. Therefore, we need to assume that there are students in our schools who are experiencing the negative effects of trauma and need targeted and intensified supports to feel safe, learn new skills and be successful at school.
- In a trauma-sensitive school environment, all behaviour is considered in the context of possible childhood trauma and all students are provided with welcoming, caring, safe and respectful learning environments.
- School safety should be considered beyond the classroom and include areas such as washrooms, the playground and the school bus.
- Safe and supportive learning environments also help students overcome some of the 'lagging skills' resulting from trauma by providing targeted interventions for the following areas:
  - *Emotional regulation:* If students are over-reacting to situations they need strategies that help them identify, express and regulate emotions such as a common vocabulary or using images to represent emotions.

## *Supporting Every Student Learning Series*

### Essential Elements for Building Trauma Sensitive Schools (cont.)

#### **Key understandings (cont.)**

- *Managing the regulation of focus and attention:* Executive functioning skills may be under-developed in students affected by childhood trauma. These students need strategies to help them focus and pay attention, and teachers need strategies to better engage these students.
- *Managing the regulation of physical arousal:* In order to learn, the brain and the body must be in a calm state and many students need explicit strategies to calm their mind and body. For example, deep slow breaths can return the student to a calm state. This also requires daily practice. Other strategies may help students understand that they can get what they need and want when they are calm (versus resorting to anger or acting out behaviour to get what they want.)
- *Managing the regulation of behaviour choice:* Some students may be experiencing physical symptoms such as a surge in adrenaline or escalating heart rate, and not know how to behave when stressful events occur. Punishing strategies are less likely to be successful (and can even escalate negative behaviour), since students may be physically incapable of choosing appropriate behaviour. Strategies such as fixing mistakes and repairing relationships are more likely to make a positive difference.
- *Creating and maintaining healthy relationships:* Students who have experienced trauma may have difficulty trusting adults. There are many types of activities that can be used to build relationships.
- All of these skills require explicit instruction and daily practice.
- Adults who are emotionally healthy and balanced are essential to creating welcoming, caring, safe and respectful learning environments. It's also important to support the mental health of staff who are immersed with students who have experienced trauma.

#### **Questions for reflection and discussion:**

- What school-wide approaches are currently being implemented that support social-emotional learning and trauma-informed practice?
- Are there current activities or practices in your school that might not feel safe for some students and could provoke students who have experienced trauma? How could these practices be improved?
- How could your school staff begin identifying and addressing 'lagging skills' that might be getting in the way of learning for some students?

#### **For more information:**

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