



Understanding Trauma - Strengthening Communities

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Trauma Responsive Insight



Drawn by ChatGpt

Trauma & Systems

Trauma-responsive practices move us from focusing only on the impact that trauma has on individuals to also incorporating into our thinking that trauma can be enacted by systems, such as schools, healthcare, economic, and family systems. Systemic trauma includes harm caused by economic and political structures that maintain inequities and injustices. These harms are the cumulative effects of “ableism, racism, sexism, heteronormativity, anti-LGBTQ sentiments, impoverishment, and disability-based trauma” (Hyter, 2026, p. 14).

Haines (2019) states that systemic trauma is “the repeated ongoing violation, exploitation, dismissal of, and/or deprivation of groups of people. State institutions, economic systems, and social norms that systematically deny people access to safety, mobility, resources, food, education, dignity, positive self-reflection, and belonging have a traumatic impact on individuals and groups.” (p. 80)

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For example, individuals with disabilities may be impacted by the cumulative effects of ableism, but also by having to deal with their disability being dismissed or with normative assumptions about behavior and communication on a daily basis.

When thinking about systemic trauma, we cannot only focus on an individual's response to trauma, while leaving policies, practices, inequities, and power imbalances that contribute to harm unchanged.



Strengthening Relationships

Strengthening relationships is both individual and institutional or systemic. It means building positive and reciprocal connections among individuals. It also means examining how institutional policies, practices, and power dynamics shape people's experiences of safety, trust, equity or fairness, accountability, and connection within systems that impact their lives.



Culture & Context Corner

Systems, schools, healthcare, social services, and clinics are not culturally neutral. Their policies and practices reflect particular cultural values about what makes up "appropriate" communication, behavior, and family interactions. When these narrowly defined assumptions are treated as universal, children and families whose cultural, linguistic, disability related experiences differ from those narrow assumptions are likely to experience systemic exclusion and inequitable treatment. Repeated experiences of having one's identity, knowledge, and ways of life being dismissed or treated as deficient can contribute to systemic trauma. Let's examine not only children's experiences within systems but also how systems respond to cultural, linguistic, gender, and disability related differences.



Myth vs. Reality

Myth

When a child presents with adaptive behaviors in school, it is important to differentiate whether the behaviors are caused by trauma or a disability.

Reality

Behaviors often show how a child is trying to adapt to their environment and manage their experiences and context. All behavior is communicative; rather than focusing on the cause, focus on what the behavior communicates. Keep in mind the child's cultural, social, historical, and environmental contexts in which the behaviors occur. A trauma-responsive lens helps us understand the child's experiences, value the child's strengths, and create safe environments that build opportunities for regulation and connection.



Strength-Based Strategies

Here are some strength-based strategies that may be helpful:

- Value children's perspectives. Recognize children as knowledgeable about their own experiences, needs, and ways of communicating.
- Challenge ableist ideas and assumptions. Avoid interpreting differences in communication, learning, or behavior as deficits that need to be corrected. Instead, try to understand how children navigate environments that may not be responsive to their needs.
- Share power and decision-making. Create opportunities for children and families to influence decisions that affect their lives. Professionals are not the sole experts.
- Affirm cultural, gender, and disability identities. Recognize children's languages, cultural practices, and gender and disability identities as strengths that contribute to communities and society.
- Dismantle systemic barriers. Examine whether institutional expectations, policies, and practices create exclusion or inequitable access to resources and opportunities. If so, work with others to transform them.



Transformative Learning Collective

Join us on **28 October 2026 at 6 p.m. Eastern Time** for our next book club discussion. We are reading ***Unbound: My Story of Liberation and the Birth of the Me Too Movement*** by Tarana Burke. Here is the registration link:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/celPcGEWTOSozTir6g0ZUA>

Journal Reflections

Journaling is not a substitute for professional support. Please reach out to a professional if you are experiencing or processing trauma.

October 2026 Journaling Prompt:

Think about your own workplaces. How do policies, practices, and power dynamics contribute to or minimize experiences of harm?

Helpful Resources

- Haines, S. (2019). *The politics of trauma: Somatics, healing, and social justice*. North Atlantic Books
- Hyter, Y. D. (2026). *Trauma-Responsive Speech-Language Therapy for Children*. Plural Publishing

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