



Quarterly Newsletter

September 2024

Trauma-Informed Teaching & Autism

Kelly Maki, SESA Autism Specialist

Trauma is a result of an event or series of events experienced by an individual physically or/and emotionally that is harmful or threatening and has a lasting, adverse effect on the individual's functioning, including mental, physical, social, and emotional well-being. (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). The observed behaviors caused by trauma can overlap with those behaviors observed in students with autism. This means the observed behaviors descriptive of students with autism are similar to students who have experienced developmental trauma. These can include a lack of interest in peers, repetitive play, outbursts, communication difficulties, compromised executive functioning, and failure to regulate emotion/effect (Cook, A, et al., 2003 and Michna, G. et al., 2022). With that said it may be difficult for an educator to determine if a student with autism has experienced trauma. A best practice for teachers is to provide students with lessons designed to teach skills that help in preventing traumatic experiences. Knowing how trauma can affect students' learning, the idea of Trauma-Informed Care, or TIC, has been developed. It is a framework for educators to use with students who have experienced trauma. TIC has five components: Safety, Choice, Collaboration, Trustworthiness, and Empowerment. How these are addressed by the classroom teacher can be different for students with autism. Consider each component and potential teaching goals and strategies to support trauma-informed teaching.

Safety is ensuring physical and emotional safety. Most students with autism will experience some level of social and emotional skills deficits. Note that these deficits alone can cause trauma for the student.

Teaching Goals:

- Ability to say "no" or "stop." Consider verbal, visual cue cards, and/or use of an AAC device, if needed.
- Identify safety signs and/or words. Consider daily/weekly practice during functional skills lessons.
- Identify potential unsafe situations and be able to communicate a need for help or assistance. Consider a social narrative to teach this skill.

Choice is providing opportunities where the individual has choice and control. Someone who has experienced trauma has had their ability to make choices taken away from them during the traumatic experience. As a student with autism, personal choices can be limited or not even available in certain circumstances, so it is important for teachers to offer choices throughout the school day and assist students in informed decision-making.

Teaching Goals:

- Provide multiple choices when the environment allows. This can include choices for an activity or lesson, a time to complete a given task (flexible schedule), or a location to complete the task.
- Build decision-making skills. Use a choice board to allow the student to practice choice-making. Give options that are preferred and not preferred. As the skills grow, challenge the student with more difficult choice options where all options are not preferred.

Collaboration involves working with the individual to make decisions, ultimately sharing power. Teachers can work alongside students with autism to model behaviors that support self-advocacy and boundary expression.

Teaching Goals:

- Use the I Do, We Do, You Do method when teaching and practicing new skills. This allows the teacher to model the expectation (I Do), collaborate with the student (We Do - Collaboration), and the student complete with feedback (You Do).

- Plan for opportunities for the student to work with varying individuals in the school, including staff and students. This can support the student's social skills development and can increase the ability (and comfortability) to express necessary needs, wants, and boundaries.

Trustworthiness is created when the teacher provides clarity and consistency while recognizing and following boundaries. Building relationships is important with all students, but it can be more difficult with students with autism because of the social/emotional skills deficit, and more so if the student has had a traumatic experience.

Teaching Goals:

- Give clear and concise directions when giving expectations to the student. Allow the student to clarify with questions if needed.
- Encourage the student to communicate what they like and dislike and be mindful of these.
- Fulfill all promises made to the student. Failure to do so could result in broken trust.

Empowerment is building the skills of having power and the ability to make decisions over one's life. For students with autism, empowerment can look different than their peers, but is just as important, especially as they grow older.

T

eaching Goals:

- Allow the student to make academic choices about the classes they enroll in and/or clubs/sports they participate in.
- Support the students' interests and give them the opportunity to learn about those interests. This can include job shadowing, peer mentoring, and practicing self-advocacy.
- Encourage the student to do for themselves, as they can. For example, have the student communicate the choices of food during lunchtime (using his or her mode of communication).

For more information about Trauma Informed Teaching and TIC, visit the websites listed below.

Alaska Department of Education and Early Department / Transforming Schools: Trauma Engaged Toolkit

<https://education.alaska.gov/apps/traumawebtoolkit/landing.html>

Trauma-Informed Care: Implementation Resource Center

<https://www.traumainformedcare.chcs.org/what-is-trauma-informed-care/>

ACEs Aware

<https://www.acesaware.org/ace-fundamentals/principles-of-trauma-informed-care/>

National Education Association

<https://www.nea.org/professional-excellence/student-engagement/tools-tips/trauma-informed-practices>

Recommended Readings from the Anne Freitag Library

https://sesa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Library_Trauma-in-the-Classroom.pdf

https://sesa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Library_Trauma.pdf