



Quarterly Newsletter

September 2024

Trauma-Informed Teaching

Amy Topmiller, SESA Multiple Disability Specialist

When we talk about trauma-informed teaching, we may have heard the language but do not truly understand what that means or the depth of the subject. Trauma-informed teaching is knowledge of the signs and symptoms of childhood trauma, recognizing them in the students you work with, and making small changes in the classroom and teaching practices to address those needs. Adverse Childhood Experiences (aka ACEs) are categories of childhood trauma that can include abuse (physical, sexual, emotional), neglect, natural disaster, witness to violence, and/or dysfunctional household (substance abuse or mental health issues). There is a correlation between childhood “high ACE scores” and poor outcomes in adulthood in the areas of social, emotional, economic, and health (Alaska Scorecard 2023). One author, Alex Shevrin Venet (2021) referred to trauma as a lens, not a label. This may help shift the perspective of many educators when addressing behaviors in the classroom that may look defiant when they are actually the result of childhood trauma. Behaviors such as avoidance, aggression, refusal, or shutting down at the surface can seem like choices but often may be the result of something deeper and a lack of skill to respond to a situation in a healthy way. Childhood trauma can negatively impact brain development, especially in the early years, and cause a series of difficulties across all domain areas of development impacting a child’s ability to learn.

According to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), Alaska ranked second highest for proven cases of child maltreatment with 18 children per 1,000 (2020 data). According to the CDC from 2019, ⅓ of children in the U.S. have experienced one or more types of trauma.

When signs that a child may have Adverse Childhood Experiences, they often cannot learn if their basic needs are unmet. [Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs](#) demonstrates the priority of needs that influence behavior including the readiness to learn.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

- Physiological (basic needs: food, water, shelter)
- Safety
- Love and belonging
- Esteem
- Self-Actualization

This applies to the needs of children who have experienced trauma. However, it is important to acknowledge there is a difference between surface-level supports and deeper, more impactful changes. Many resources cite that systemic changes and social changes are needed to embrace and implement trauma-engaged practices effectively.

In students with cognitive impairments who experience trauma, we know this population is much more at risk for abuse and neglect and often lacks the skill to report it or communicate about it. This makes finding supportive resources for these individuals more challenging, especially within the state. It is important to note that students with significant disabilities need support just like every other student who experiences trauma. They may need a modified version of support to meet their cognitive needs, communication needs, and level of understanding, but they need the support like any other child.

Teaching strategies that have proven effective for students who experience trauma include:

- Establishing a routine (predictability)
- Creating a safe environment (both emotionally and physically)
- Develop a trusting relationship with students

- Offer choice throughout the student's day
- Provide support to the students to help them regulate themselves (IES 2024)

Handout: [Do's and Dont's of a Trauma-Informed Compassionate Classroom](#)

Regardless of abilities or disabilities, children need communities, schools, and educators to not only be informed about what childhood trauma looks like but more importantly how to support children who are impacted by it. To find additional resources for students with cognitive impairment and/or multiple disabilities, please reach out to your SESA specialist.

Resources

De Lapp, J. (2022, June 30). *The Impact of Trauma on Students & Learning*. ExceptionalChildren.org.

<https://exceptionalchildren.org/blog/impact-trauma-students-learning>

Eckstein-Koas, M. (2021, March 26). *What is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs?* Continued.com.

<https://www.continued.com/early-childhood-education/ask-the-experts/what-maslow-s-hierarchy-needs-23715>

Human Restoration Project (2021, April 10). *Equity-Centered, Trauma-Informed Teaching w/ Alex Venet*.

Humanrestorationproject.org. https://www.humanrestorationproject.org/podcasts/90-equity-centered-trauma-informed-teaching-w-alex-venet?gad_source=1&gclid=Cj0KCQjw0Oq2BhCCARIsAA5hubVeZ2QjSGQGC78yKAGwQ1-RdxXqg0y-6wWc5a9gnWQvNsaOk7BW32EaAlqWEALw_wcB

Institute of Education Sciences (2024, January 1). *Developing Trauma-Sensitive Classrooms to Support Students and Educators*. ies.ed.gov. https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/regions/appalachia/pdf/RELAP_4-1-3_Session3-Strategies-Trauma-Sensitive-Classroom_Acc.pdf

McMurtie, B. (2020, June 4). *What Does Trauma-Informed Teaching Look Like?* The Chronicle of Higher Education. https://openlab.bmcc.cuny.edu/bla-conexiones-connections-trauma-informed-pedagogy-workshop-summer-2021/wp-content/uploads/sites/1823/2021/08/What-Does-Trauma-Informed-Teaching-Look-Like_-The-Chronicle-of-Higher-Education.pdf

Minahan, J. (2019, October 1). *Trauma-Informed Teaching Strategies*. Ascd.org. <https://ascd.org/el/articles/trauma-informed-teaching-strategies>

State of Alaska (2023, January 1). *PROTECTING VULNERABLE ALASKANS*. Alaska.gov.

<https://health.alaska.gov/Commissioner/Documents/MentalHealth/scorecard/Goal-6.pdf>