

Trauma-Informed Schools

Educator Toolkit

Our mission is to build resilience and success for all North Carolina students and educators. Using school-specific training and coaching, we seek to create safer and more supportive schools that champion the whole child, reduce the impact of stress and trauma, and foster school communities where all feel valued.



Part 1:
Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), Trauma, Stress Response & the Brain

What is a Trauma-Informed School?



Objective: Understand the principles of a trauma-informed school, the science of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and the impact of trauma on the brain and stress response system.

KEY COMPONENTS

1. Definition of a Trauma-Informed School:

- A trauma-informed school **recognizes and responds** to the impact of traumatic stress on students, staff, and families.
- A trauma-informed school integrates understanding of trauma into **policies, practices, and environments** to foster safety, trust, and resilience.
- A trauma-informed school focuses on **the whole child** by supporting academic achievement and social-emotional well-being.
- A trauma-informed school prioritizes **staff well-being**, ensuring educators have the support and strategies needed to foster resilience for themselves and their students.
- While a trauma-informed school begins with specifically understanding students who are experiencing trauma, this approach actually benefits ALL students.

→ **Video:** [Fall-Hamilton Elementary School: Embracing Trauma-Informed Practices](#)

→ **Video:** [Trauma-Sensitive Middle/High School](#)

→ **Resource:** [Developing Trauma-Sensitive Classrooms](#)

- **Examples of Trauma-Informed Strategies:**

- **Morning check-ins** to assess students' emotional state
- **Calm-down spaces** or reset areas for emotional regulation
- **Restorative practices** to repair harm and strengthen relationships
- **Predictable routines** to create a sense of safety and stability
- **Strength-based discipline approaches** that focus on skill-building rather than punishment

2. Understanding Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), Trauma, and Toxic Stress:

- **ACEs:** Potentially traumatic experiences occurring before age 18, such as abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction. Research shows that **64% of people** have experienced at least one ACE, and the more ACEs an individual experiences, the higher the risk for negative health and life outcomes.

→ **Resource:** [CDC on ACEs](#)

★ **Note:** The original ACEs study did not include additional adversities such as racism, discrimination, community violence, natural disasters, poverty, food insecurity, or pandemics, all of which impact childhood development and well-being.

- **Trauma:** Trauma is not the event itself but rather the **RESPONSE** to an event perceived as physically or emotionally damaging; overwhelming one's ability to cope. Trauma is different for everyone—two people can experience the same event but respond in very different ways.

→ **Activity:** [ACEs Resource Packet](#)

- **Toxic Stress:** Prolonged activation of the stress response system **without adequate support**. This can alter brain development and increase the risk of emotional and behavioral challenges.

3. Impact of Trauma on the Stress Response System and Brain:

- **Stress Response System:**

- When experiencing an actual threat, the stress response system is beneficial—it keeps us safe. However, **toxic stress can cause this system to become overactive**, leading to **fight, flight, or freeze responses** even in non-threatening situations

- **Brain Development:**

- **Prefrontal Cortex (Reasoning & Decision-Making):** Impacted by chronic stress, making focus, problem-solving, and impulse control more difficult.
- **Amygdala (Emotional Processing & Fear Response):** Becomes overactive, leading to heightened anxiety, aggression, or emotional outbursts.
- **Hippocampus (Memory & Learning):** Chronic stress can shrink this area, impacting information retention and recall.

→ **Video:** [Wise Owl & Barking Dog](#)

→ **Resource:** [How Does Trauma Affect the Brain?](#)

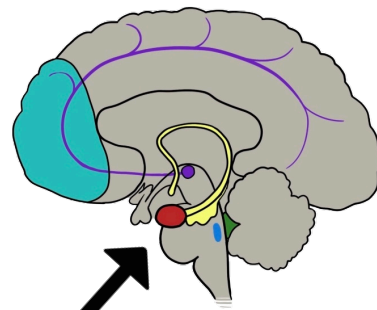
→ **Activity:** [The Flipped Lid Hand Model](#)



Prefrontal Cortex



Amygdala



TEACHER STRATEGIES

1. Watch for signs of an activated stress response system (e.g., hypervigilance, withdrawal, aggression).
2. Create **safe and predictable** environments (including calm spaces, reset spaces, etc.)
3. Validate student experiences without judgment.(e.g., use of affective statements, etc.)
4. Consider possible reasons behind a student's challenging behavior rather than assuming defiance.
5. Teach and model emotional regulation strategies, such as deep breathing or grounding techniques.

→ **Activity:** [Introduction to Mindfulness Grades K-2](#)

→ **Activity:** [Introduction to Mindfulness Grades 3-5](#)

→ **Activity:** [Introduction to Mindfulness Grades 6-8](#)



TOOLKIT ACTIVITIES



Reflection Exercise: How does trauma show up in your classroom?

- How do fight, flight or freeze responses manifest in student behavior?
- Reflect on a student you've worked with—how might their behavior be connected to past trauma?
- What strategies could you implement to better support students displaying these behaviors?

→ **Resource & Activity:**

[Recognizing Fight, Flight, and Freeze Responses](#)

Case Study: Practicing Trauma-Informed Responses

- Review hypothetical student scenarios and brainstorm trauma-informed responses.
- Discuss: **How does understanding brain science shift your approach to behavior management?**
- Consider: **What practices can you implement tomorrow to foster a trauma-sensitive classroom?**
- Consider: **How can trauma-informed practice fit seamlessly into the curriculum?**

→ **Activity:** [Case Study Scenarios](#)

→ **Activity:** [Adventures of the Center City Kids -Literacy Connection](#)

NEXT STEPS

- Engage in a school-wide reflection on trauma-informed practices.
- Identify one new strategy to integrate into your daily routine.



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Appendix

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