

TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

Trauma-informed care is a way of engaging children that recognizes the pervasiveness and presence of trauma and promotes interactions, experiences, and environments that are healthy, healing, and safe.

According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), trauma negatively impacts school performance, learning, development, and physical and emotional health.¹¹ Young people often respond to trauma behaviorally. Here are some signs children may have experienced or may be experiencing trauma:

- **Preschool:** separation anxiety, regression, slow or stalled development, difficulty sleeping, unexplained outbursts, signs or complaints of illness or injury, over- or underreacting to touch, whiny, irritable, worried, fearful, frequent talk of death and dying.
- **Elementary School:** preoccupation with safety, worries about violence, irritable, moody, major behavioral changes, distrust, difficulties responding appropriately to social cues, signs or complaints of illness or injury, changes in school performance, hyperarousal, avoidance, difficulties with authority.
- **Middle and High School:** preoccupation with safety, anxiety, worries about violence, major behavioral changes, discomfort with feelings, increased risk of substance abuse, difficulty trusting others, over- or underreacting to loud noises and lights, thoughts and comments about death and dying, hyperarousal, avoidance, emotional numbness.

As with warning signs of mental illness, these behaviors are not always related to trauma, and some kids experience trauma with no external signs of distress. Even so, these are behaviors that interfere with kids' abilities to live, learn, and thrive, and they can be helped by trauma-informed practices. In NCTSN's Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators, the following strategies are recommended to support children who have experienced trauma:

- Maintain routines and consistency. These communicate safety and normalcy.
- Give choices. Trauma often robs children of choice and control. Try to restore both.
- Increase verbal support and encouragement.
- Before reacting to problematic behaviors, consider whether they could be a trauma response.
- Set and communicate clear limits for inappropriate behavior with logical and related consequences.
- Be sensitive to possible trauma triggers like loud noises, bright lights, or stormy weather.
- Understand that children may cope by reenacting trauma (e.g., hitting someone if they were hit).
- Anticipate difficult times and bring in additional resources and supports.
- Warn children before doing something unusual, like turning off the lights or making a loud noise.

This information is adapted from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network Schools Committee. (October 2008). Child trauma toolkit for educators. Los Angeles, CA & Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.