

# Creating Trauma-informed Schools that Support Student Resilience: Expanding Lessons from Preschool and Elementary School Intervention

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Jerrie Jacobs-Kenner, Cheryl Holmes, Michelle Levy, Susan Pinne & Avis Smith

*I went to school to learn to teach preschoolers. You know, writing their name, using scissors, saying please and thank you, sharing with friends. I wasn't prepared for the level of frustration, anger, and sadness in my students. It was overwhelming, and I was so tired every day. -Teacher*

Students and teachers bring their life experiences, emotions and beliefs into the classroom every day. Too often, children are exposed to traumatic events, such as sexual abuse, bullying, witnessing violence, and separation from parents due to incarceration and deportation. Understanding how traumatic events may impact students' emotions and behaviors, and creating an environment for all students to feel safe to learn, underlies a growing movement towards establishing trauma-informed schools.

Research has clearly shown that exposure to traumatic events can have a significant impact on behavior and performance in the classroom (NCTSN, 2008). Children who have experienced complex trauma often have difficulty regulating their emotions and may demonstrate "fight, flight or freeze" responses. Without proper training and skills, caring adults may negatively impact children when responding to undesired behaviors. Of particular note for educators, exposure to trauma can have a significant, harmful effect on the brain's ability to process information in order to learn.

This article presents lessons learned from a unique model called Trauma Smart® (TS, formerly known as Head Start Trauma Smart), TS is designed to support pre-kindergarten and elementary age children and the adults who care for them by calmly navigating difficult life circumstances with hands-on, practical tools and effective strategies used in the places where kids learn every day. TS goals include:

- Teaching school staff and parents about the life-long effects of trauma and the importance of teaching healthy resiliency skills

- Teaching and supporting parents and school personnel on how to help children learn to express their emotions in a healthy way that prepares them for social and academic success
- Guiding educational organizations to develop trauma-informed, resilient cultures that inspire teachers, school staff, parents and students to thrive

### **Addressing Trauma in a School Environment**

Crittenton Children’s Center created TS in 2008, after decades of providing therapeutic services to children in Head Start and public school settings. While therapy was helpful for individual children, the need for deeper, organizational level support was profound. At the time, there were several models available to address social and emotional development, but none that addressed the high levels of toxic stress and traumatic events experienced in the educational settings that Crittenton serves.

TS was initially implemented in three Head Start programs that included 15 locations in urban, mostly low-income areas. Today, TS is in urban, suburban and rural locations in Missouri, Kansas, Michigan, Tennessee, Washington, Wisconsin, Alaska and throughout New York City. A full description of the model as initially implemented is available (Holmes, Levy, Smith, Pinne, & Neese, 2015). [http://www.traumacenter.org/products/pdf\\_files/Trauma\\_Smart\\_JCFS.pdf](http://www.traumacenter.org/products/pdf_files/Trauma_Smart_JCFS.pdf)

### **Trauma Smart: A Transformational Approach**

TS intends to create a culture shift through common language, concepts, and practices that over time results in fully trauma-informed organizations. Integrating education, mental health, and overall child well-being into one model, the four pillars of TS include:

1. *Staff Resilience and Skill Building* - School staff, including teachers, administrators, mental health providers, bus drivers, kitchen staff, and others receive training in foundational knowledge and learn skills in response and self-care.
2. *Mastery of Classroom Strategies* – Coaches reinforce the application of lessons learned in training sessions by observing the classroom, modeling concepts and skills, and supporting teachers to incorporate effective strategies.

3. *Parent Engagement and Skill Building* – Parents are educated about trauma’s impact and given opportunities to improve their ability to teach their children and themselves how to be more resilient.
4. *Response for Children with High Needs* – Children with emotional and behavior challenges, as identified by parents and teachers, are screened for trauma exposure and receive individual, trauma-focused services as needed.

Brief examples for each of these four pillars follow as a way to show how they transfer into practice.

### **Staff Resilience and Skill Building**

TS is grounded in Kinniburgh and Blaustein’s Attachment, Self-regulation and Competency (ARC) Framework for fostering resiliency. ARC recognizes that caregivers’ ability to effectively manage their own emotions and behaviors is crucial to their ability to guide children through difficult times. Helping stressed children is challenging work. Caregivers who are unable to control their own feelings of frustration and anger are at risk of negatively impacting the child, themselves and others. Staff who are struggling to calmly respond to their students are often influenced by:

- Triggers - an often unconscious reminder of a prior negative or traumatic interaction
- Secondary trauma - stress from contact with others who are experiencing toxic or traumatic stress
- Inadequate self-care

TS educates staff members about triggers and secondary trauma and equips them with self-care strategies easily used in and outside of the classroom. As one teacher trained in TS observed:

*Making sure we were communicating with each other throughout the day about our energy and feelings was helpful not only for our bonding – for making us a strong team – but also insured that we had a strong foundation for dealing with some of the more challenging behaviors. Trauma Smart gave us the language to talk about our stress, how we were feeling, and the impact that had on our ability to be there for our students. - teacher*

### **Mastery of Classroom Strategies: Coaching and Consultation**

Trauma Smart offers coaching to help teachers transfer the lessons learned in training to practice in the classroom. The case of Mrs. Smith and her student, “Cara” illustrates TS classroom consultation.

Cara pinched Mrs. Smith whenever she walked by. Mrs. Smith found herself avoiding Cara because her pinches hurt! The TS coach helped Mrs. Smith reframe this aggravating behavior by considering what need Cara might be expressing. They decided that perhaps Cara was trying to make a connection with Mrs. Smith and this was the only way she knew how. The coach encouraged Mrs. Smith to find other ways to connect with Cara. Mrs. Smith taught Cara to give a high five instead of pinching. Now, every time Mrs. Smith walks by Cara she smiles, makes eye contact and puts out her hand for a high five. Cara beams and high fives her right back.

Knowing how to respond to the many diverse ways children convey distress or desire for connection can be a challenge for many teachers. To manage a classroom of children manifesting diverse behaviors, a teacher needs an array of tools and support for addressing students’ individual needs. Coaching provides opportunities for teachers to discuss, practice, and receive feedback. While the primary intent of coaching is to help teachers create a more sensitive classroom overall, coaching support also validates the very normal feelings (e.g. frustration, uncertainty) that adults often experience in their work with children exhibiting diverse emotional challenges.

### **Parent Engagement and Skill Building: Trauma Smart at Home**

Similar to training provided to staff, parents and guardians receive education, modeling, and opportunities for guided practice. For example, as part of the ARC training on “Routines and Rituals”, parents are asked to reflect on their own morning routine and what happens with their bodies, emotions, and energy levels when the routine is disrupted (e.g. when one oversleeps). In reflecting on their own experiences, participants are reminded that routines decrease anxiety and increase feelings of safety. Parents are encouraged to explore ideas for daily routines around

homework, mealtime and bedtime. Training parents and caregivers ensures that children experience consistency across home and school environments and extends the supportive, trauma-informed culture into the broader community.

Charity's mother, Elise, worked the night shift. Charity was very upset each evening when her mom left for work. Her father, John, let her watch television until she fell asleep late on the sofa. The next day, she was tired and quick to get frustrated and angry. John attended TS workshops and learned to create a bedtime routine that helped Charity ease her anxiety. While John cleaned up after dinner, Charity snuggled with her mom and watched a show on TV. Elise and Charity developed a "special" handshake to say goodbye. After Elise left for work, John gave Charity a bath and read a book in Charity's room. Within the week, Charity was more comfortable with Elise leaving for work and was looking forward to her bedtime routine with her dad. She got more rest and was able to handle frustrations at school the next day.

### **Enhanced Response for Children with High Needs: Therapeutic Intervention As Needed**

Unaddressed trauma can affect children's beliefs about themselves and their world, leading them to feel "I am not safe" and "it will never get better". These beliefs drive a child's responses and behaviors, which can be highly disruptive in the classroom. When a teacher or parent is concerned about a child and makes a referral for individual treatment, the child's parents/caregivers complete a trauma events inventory. TS data indicates that 92% of children referred experienced at least one traumatic incident, 79% experienced two or more events, and 69% had three or more incidents (Boulden, 2015, p. 3). Most frequently experienced events included separation from parents (59%), family member incarcerated (53%) and having someone in the home abusing drugs or alcohol (42%) (ibid). For these children, more intensive intervention, often focused on helping children change their thinking and beliefs about themselves, is provided by TS clinicians or community mental health providers.

*Jake was so defeated. When his dad left, it seemed like he blamed himself. His therapist helped Jake identify what he was really feeling and then talked to his mom and to me about it. She also taught him ways to deal with his feelings. He has started laughing again! - Jake's 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher*

## **Results are Promising**

A number of school-based initiatives, including TS, are demonstrating that a trauma-informed focus holds promise for improving student and school outcomes (Trauma-informed schools, n.d.; Verbitsky-Savitz et al, 2016; Boulden, 2015, p.6). Secondary schools that have implemented trauma initiatives are finding payoffs in the form of decreased suspensions and expulsions, improvements in attendance and academic performance, and helping children, families, and staff to respond to adversity in ways that are more effective. These important findings have educational leaders seeking effective approaches to addressing the impact of trauma and creating a trauma-sensitive environment to build the resilience of students of all ages.

*Since implementing TS this year, we have reduced the staff in the behavior management classroom because the incoming preschoolers have little to no reported behavior concerns. This wasn't how the year began. The staff were frustrated and overwhelmed by the needs of the students. They began TS with extreme resistance, but by January they became intentional in implementing TS. - Behavior Management Classroom Teacher*

## **Lessons Learned From Trauma Smart Schools**

**Trauma is happening everywhere** Given national rates of exposure, it is highly likely there are a significant number of children within a given school dealing with the effects of trauma. Trauma is an issue for all communities and no one is immune to exposure. Promoting trauma-informed approaches like TS helps traumatized children heal and non-traumatized children benefit from less conflict and an environment focused on building resiliency skills necessary for academic and life success.

**Training everyone to respond** Sustaining a trauma-informed culture requires the engagement and buy-in of the entire school. Training for all staff members is needed for true transformation. Training needs to focus on clear and practical applications that can be used in a variety of settings – classroom, home, and community. School leadership that demonstrates the importance of being trauma-informed is paramount to success.

**Concentrating on the classroom** Ongoing training, regular support and reinforcement of the concepts and skills learned is needed. Coaching opportunities can ensure lessons are translated into practice and offer support for dealing with challenging behaviors. The goal is to acknowledge trauma may be impacting behavior and to provide resources and supports to help teachers fulfill multiple roles.

**Caring for staff and other caretakers** Strategies should include resources for teachers, caregivers, and other adults involved with children. Adults can only give to the extent they themselves are taken care of and feel supported. Self-care is essential to helping others.

**Schools and districts need support too** Society often turns to schools when children's needs are identified. Many of the expectations for schools are applied without additional resources. Given what is known about the impact of trauma on learning, development, and long-term well-being, policy makers and funders should consider what supports, including funding, are needed for schools and districts to shift to more trauma-informed environment.

### **Developing Skills that Benefit for a Lifetime**

The National Center for Trauma-Informed Care notes that understanding trauma and its impact leads us to ask a child "what happened to you?" rather than "what's wrong with you?" Teaching resiliency typically includes strategies to help students learn and utilize social-emotional skills. Using these skills helps all students cope with stress and increases their ability to adapt or "bounce back" in the face of adversity.

Schools committed to becoming trauma-informed can benefit from practical, comprehensive approaches that include training, coaching, and therapeutic intervention. TS data show benefits to providing teachers, children, and their families with practical skills they can easily integrate into their school, home, and community life. Trauma-informed teachers and other caregivers can help all children build resilience by identifying their feelings, teaching them to regulate their emotions, and building their competencies to respond to future adversities in healthy, effective ways. This approach also helps ensure that adults do not inadvertently "re-traumatize" children who may still be struggling with the effects of their experiences. With the high prevalence of children exposed to traumatic events, part of the promise of the TS model is

creating trauma informed schools that can benefit all children and help them develop healthy coping skills essential to learning and life success.

One teacher noted the following:

*Trauma Smart helped me to look at [my students and myself] differently. To know that it isn't about me. If I can help the children feel safe with me and help them regulate themselves, they will be ready and able to participate in all of the things I have to teach.*

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