

Understanding Childhood Trauma & Tips for Creating Trauma-Informed Schools

*Attachment and Trauma Treatment Centre for Healing
Healing life's hurts through awareness, compassion & self-care*



What is Trauma?

Trauma experiences can be the result of many things including: abuse, loss, exposure to domestic violence, or separation and divorce. Trauma can result from directly experiencing these things or from witnessing them.

What Does Trauma look like?

Trauma reactions differ for each person & can include:

- Hyperarousal
- Difficulty sleeping
- Difficulty focusing
- Dissociation
- Regressive behaviours
- Hypervigilance
- Engaging in risky behaviour
- Sudden changes in mood
- Headaches/stomachache

Trauma's Impact on learning and school performance

Trauma experiences impact learning because of the way fear and terror create changes in the brain & nervous system.

A child who experiences trauma may become frozen in an activated state of arousal which may include a persistent fear for their safety and a heightened state of alert.

This aroused state of fear makes it difficult for a child to:

- Process verbal information
- Following direction
- Recall what was heard
- Making sense out of what is being said
- Focus
- Retain information



Keys ways to ensure your school is trauma sensitive

- Educate all school staff in understanding trauma and how it impacts children
- Provide nurturing environments (both through staff-child relationships & physical spaces)
- Provide movement activities throughout the day to regulate the body and mind
- Replace punitive behaviour interventions by recognizing triggers quickly and encouraging children to identify and regulate (see tips below) their big emotions
- Encourage joy and laughter – this stimulates higher order thinking
- Limit electronic use, this activates the part of the brain that increases dysregulation
- Closely monitor peer interactions – if play interactions escalate to quickly dysregulation may occur.
- Identify places of safety and a safety support person (if possible). Consider creating a calming space in the classroom. This may include: beanbag chair or a pile of pillows, stuffed animals, silly putty, a pinwheel, music with headphones, crayons and Mandelaz



Strategies to Promote Regulation

- Encourage deep tummy breathing with activities and tools such as bubbles & pinwheels
- Help centre children to the present. Ask questions like: What do you hear, taste, feel around you. Help them use their senses to tune into the here and now (a state of mindfulness).
- Introduce them to guided imagery with sensory input – have them visualize a relaxation space (what does it feel like, smell like, taste like, sound like, etc.)
- Introduce yoga – incorporates deep breathing and mindfulness



Lori Gill, CEO and Lead Trauma Therapist is a Certified Trauma Specialist and Trainer for the National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children. ATTCH offers evidenced-based and evidenced-informed training for schools and clinicians based on current research and best practice. To learn more about training opportunities for your school, inclusive of intervention strategies, please contact training@attch.org or call (905)262-0303.