A Discipline Approach with a Trauma-Informed Framework

Considering School Discipline through a Grief- and Trauma-Informed Lens

"Understanding trauma is not just about acquiring knowledge. It is about changing the way you view the world. It's about changing the helping paradigm from 'What is wrong with you?' to 'What happened to you?'"

Sandra Bloom, 2007

What does a trauma-informed school look like?

A trauma-informed school environment provides opportunities for students to have their needs met. Looking at prevention from the student perspective, appropriate behavior is generally achieved when students:

- Feel connected to the teacher, one another, and the curriculum being taught.
- Believe that success is attainable with reasonable effort as part of individual goal-setting.
- Feel respected by being heard; have voice and choice, and feel teachers strongly care about them in individual and personal ways.
- Feel a level of trust and safety in their school community.
- Are given responsibility, especially in helping other children; this involves being given autonomy to these choices.
- Look forward to sanctioned moments of gratitude, joy, and laughter every day.
- Believe that what is being taught is relevant and purpose-driven.

Why should we look at discipline from a trauma-informed lens?

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network has found that one out of four children attending school has been exposed to a traumatic event. Educators attend college to learn how to teach students. Administrators go to graduate school to learn how to lead a campus. Thus, many teachers and administrators are often not equipped or prepared to teach and support youth who have emotional trauma. Teachers and administrators can also become quickly overwhelmed if they do not understand the scope and impact of trauma on their students.

Viewing the classroom and discipline practices through a trauma-informed lens can give clues as to why some students are triggered during fire drills or by a loud noise; why some students can't sit still or stare out the window; or why some students are even triggered by going home during a school break. Oftentimes these triggers elicit a negative behavior and the student ends up in the administrator's office after a discipline infraction.

Educators across the nation report that they are seeing more and more children with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in their classroom. Many students with trauma have also been misdiagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

The image below outlines the foundations for Trauma Informed Care (TIC). A commitment to trauma awareness and an understanding of the impact of historical trauma and oppression are the first steps to ensuring that discipline is viewed through a trauma-informed lens.

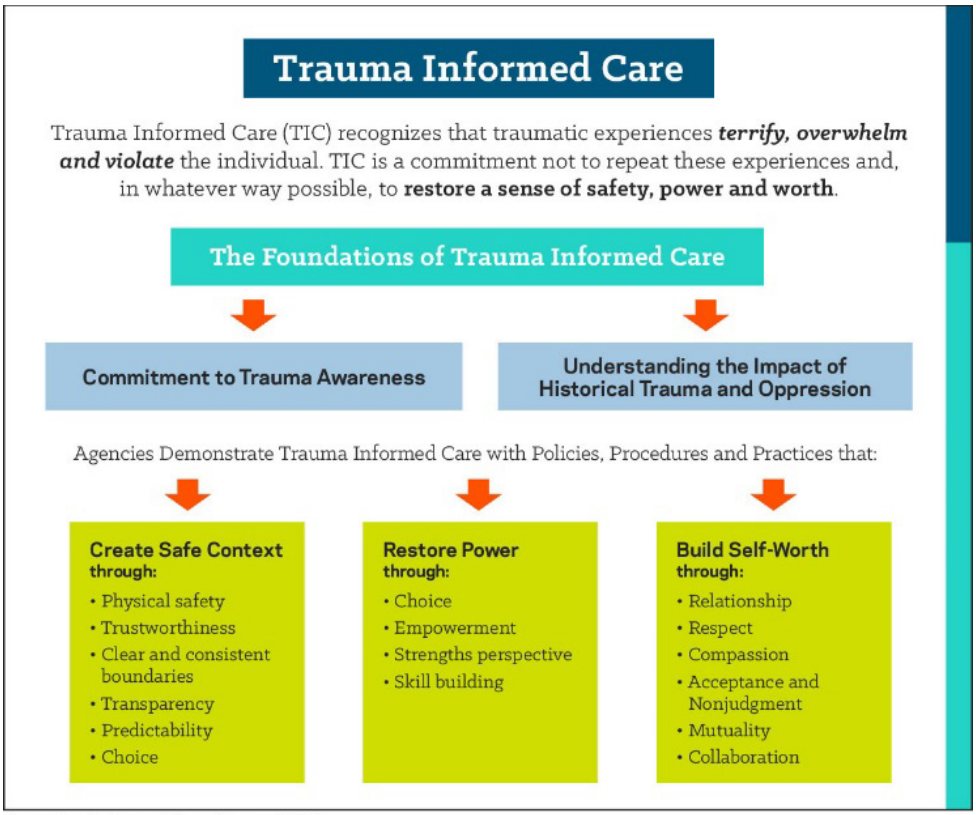

Image Credit: Trauma Informed Oregon, 2014
Source: https://traumainformedoregon.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Slides-for-Module-1-What-is-Trauma-Informed-Care.pdf

Becoming trauma-informed requires a shift in the traditional educational paradigm of classroom management and discipline practices. The creation of a safe context, restoring of power for students, and building of student self-worth are important first steps.

- When school leaders and staff members explore and examine the purpose behind the behavior, this yields the leader a different perspective.
- Benefits include improved academic achievement, school climate and culture, retention of teachers, and teacher satisfaction.
- Benefits include reduction of staff and student stress, student behavioral outbursts and referrals to the office, absenteeism, deletion, suspensions, dropouts, and student bullying and harassment.
  Oehlberg, 2008

Trauma-Informed Classroom Strategies:

- Always empower, never disempower: avoid battles for power with students. Students who have experienced trauma often seek to control their environment to protect themselves, and their behavior will generally deteriorate when they feel more helpless.
- Classroom expectations are necessary but should be determined in a way that is respectful, consistent, and nonviolent.
- Provide unconditional positive regard; as consistently caring adults, school staff have the opportunity to help students build trust and form relationships.

- Maintain high expectations: set and enforce limits in a consistent way. Maintain the same high expectations of a student who has experienced trauma as you do for his/her peers. Create a classroom climate and culture that feels safe and predictable to students and staff. Actively ignore negative behavior. Maintain a 10:1 ratio of positive to negative statements for traumatized children/adolescents.
- Check assumptions, observe, and question: trauma can affect all students and can manifest in many different ways. Realize when you are making assumptions, and instead, talk with the student and ask questions. Make observations about the student's behaviors and be fully engaged in listening to his/her response.
- Be a relationship coach: help students from preschool through high school develop social skills and support positive relationships between children and their caregivers. Provide guided opportunities for helpful participation: model, foster, and support ongoing peer "helping" interactions (e.g., peer tutoring, support groups).
- Spend time getting to know your students—know their strengths, their weaknesses, and their stories. Draw on their strengths in classroom activities to promote resiliency. Deepen your understanding about the community the student lives in and available resources for the student and family
- Explicitly teach emotions, feelings, and coping skills (use of scales and "thermometer" to rate emotion intensity, role-playing, teach students how to ask for help when needed).
- View the Texas Education Agency's Project Restore video series.

LEVEL	TIER 3: Targeted/Intensive Supports (Tertiary Intervention)
Students	School-based, trauma-specific individual, group, and family therapy services for students with trauma-related mental health difficulties; includes intensive collateral work with students' teachers, as well as consultation around Individualized Education Program (IEP) assessment and plans when IEP is warranted
Adults (staff and caregivers)	Brief crisis support for trauma-impacted school staff, and referral for more intensive services if needed
	Engaging and supporting parents/caregivers as part of their children's psychotherapy
System	Consultation around central district office personnel efforts to improve the district-wide Educationally Related Mental Health Services (ERMHS) process
	TIER 2: Selected Supports (Secondary Intervention)
Students	Psychoeducational skill-building interventions for at-risk students
Adults (staff and caregivers)	Wellness (non-treatment) support for school staff that addresses stress, burnout, and secondary trauma (e.g., teacher wellness groups)
	Participating in Coordinated Care Team meetings that address the needs of at-risk students and coordinate integrated responses, as well as; respond to school-wide concerns
System	Consultation to school or district efforts to re-examine and revise discipline policies and procedures, and alternatives to suspension
	TIER 1: Universal Supports (Primary Prevention)
Students	Classroom training for students on coping with stress
Adults (staff and caregivers)	Training and consultation for all school staff (e.g., teachers, administrators, support staff, paraprofessionals, and school medical and mental health staff) around (a) trauma-sensitive practices, and (b) addressing stress, burnout, and secondary trauma
	Psychoeducation and skill-building workshops for parents/caregivers on coping with stress
System	Providing a trauma-informed lens to school staff in their implementation of school-wide supports and interventions (e.g., Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, Restorative Justice/Practices, social emotional learning curricula)

http://design.fixschooldiscipline.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/Dorado-Martinez-McArthur-Leibovitz-SMH-2016-with-figures-1.pdf

"The truth about childhood is stored up in our bodies and lives in the depths of our souls. Our intellect can be deceived, our feelings can be numbed and manipulated, our perceptions shamed and confused, our bodies tricked with medication, but our soul never forgets. And because we are one, one whole soul in one body, someday our body will present its bill." - Alice Miller

Recommendations for Revising School Discipline Policies

1. Avoid exclusionary school discipline practices that push away the child already impacted by trauma and clearly communicate messages of rejection which are likely to retraumatize the child. Consider developing school discipline policies to teach, build skills, and offer alternatives to out-of-school suspensions.

2. Implement school-wide positive behavioral supports. See Education Law Center's "School-Wide Positive Behavior Support: A Plan for Pennsylvania", available at http://www.elc-pa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/ELC_PBSBrief_9_8_10.pdf.

3. Approach discipline with the assumption that children are always doing the best that they can, working from where they are emotionally, intellectually, and developmentally right now. Meet the children where they are. Their behavior is a product of their past experiences, good and bad.

4. Consistent with current training for many educators, de-escalation and redirection should be the first-line response any time discipline is needed. Educators may also learn effective strategies to co-regulate behavior with a student while teaching skills.

5. Form relationships with parents/caregivers and families. They can be valuable allies and almost always have the child's best interest at heart.

6. Avoid "criminalizing" children. Children understand and internalize a lot of what is going on around them. Telling a child that they are in detention for an hour may be experienced by a child as similar to sentencing a criminal to a certain amount of time in prison. This often leads to either conscious or unconscious labeling of the child as "bad," both by the staff and students. Rather, a referral to talk with a counselor or student services support personnel, as established within a school's multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), to investigate why a student has acted out and to develop a plan to address the student's needs or lagging skills, may be more appropriate and less likely to cause further trauma. "Bad" behavior is a symptom of a larger issue to be examined and addressed with a trauma-informed lens.

7. Promote consistency and safety when enforcing school discipline policies.

8. Work to prevent future behavioral problems. Follow a plan of learning, reassessing, and reintegrating. When a child has a behavioral issue, take him/her aside in private and ask, "What can we learn from this?" By doing this, incidents become learning opportunities that can improve how the child relates to others and views his/her time in the classroom. Next, reassess how the child sees himself/herself and what has changed as a result of this incident. Finally, the reintegration of the child into the classroom can occur.