



Pre-K to Prison Pipeline

Trauma- Informed Care

A traumatic event is something very scary, dangerous, or upsetting that happens to someone.

It makes them feel really unsafe, helpless, or afraid. For a young child, a traumatic event could be seeing a car accident, losing a parent suddenly, or being physically hurt by someone else. A traumatic event could also be watching another child in their classroom be physically or emotionally out of control or watching an adult respond in anger or restraining another child. Even if the event only happens one time, it can still impact the child for a long time. Chronic stress is when someone feels worried, upset, or scared a lot of the time. For a young child, chronic stress could happen when they move homes a lot, do not have regular meals, or are around people who are fighting a lot.

Young learners who experience traumatic events or chronic stress have a bigger risk for serious problems. They can have a hard time understanding language and talking. They can struggle with focus and remembering things—this can make it hard to learn. They may also have difficulty with sensory skills like touch, sound, or movement. This can make it hard for them to use their bodies well. These young learners may also have problems with very big emotions that they do not know how to control.

These things can make it hard for children to tell adults what is happening to them. They may also hide or sit very quietly and not play, or they may not eat or sleep. Children may even use hitting, yelling, or running away as a way of telling you. These behaviors may make adults sad or mad. Adults need to listen and know that a child is not doing a behavior to be bad. Adults need to know that these behaviors are a child's way of saying, "Something is wrong."

In preschools, teachers may feel more stress when a child is having a hard time. Taking the child away from other children (exclusion), or telling them they cannot come back to school (suspension or expulsion) only makes life harder for children.

A trauma-informed approach in preschool may help. (See the sidebar for six things that the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration says are trauma-informed.)

6 things that the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (SAMHSA) says are trauma-informed:

1. Physical and Emotional Safety
2. Trustworthiness and Transparency
3. Mutuality and Collaboration
4. Empowerment of Voice and Choice
5. Peer Support
6. Historical Considerations

Approach Principles and Ideas for Your Preschool Center

Physical and Emotional Safety

Children

- Have food and drink available anytime a child says they are hungry or thirsty.
- Offer different sensory activities during the day (sight, smell, touch, movement, and sound) and at least every 2 hours.
- Facilitate group co-regulation activities at least every 2 hours.
- Be kind and gentle, especially when they make mistakes—do not shame or give harsh consequences.

Families

- Help families know that you want their child to stay at your center.
- Let them know that you want their child to feel safe at school.
- Greet them warmly every time you see them.

Staff

- Take care of your personal care needs—eat, go to the bathroom, take a break.
- Build in regular breathing breaks during the day so that you (and the children in your class) can stop and breathe.

Trustworthiness and Transparency

Children

- Have clear, predictable schedules and routines—stick to them.
- Give children time and space to tell you what they need—listen and pay attention to them.

Families

- Communicate clearly, often, and with total honesty.
- Be consistent and reliable.

Staff

- Be consistent and reliable for children and families—keep promises you make.
- Be open with your administration about what the problems are and ideas for how to change them.

Mutuality and Collaboration

Children

- Remember you are working with them, not for them or to “do” things for them.
- Talk to them with “us” language—“How can we solve this problem together?” or “Let us clean up together.”
- Give children real-life jobs in the classroom—water the plants, wipe the table for lunch, etc. Be sure every child has a chance to do them.

Families

- Request to meet frequently throughout the year.
- Remind families that they are an important part of the team.

Staff

- Sharing power with children and families makes your job easier.

Empowerment of Voice and Choice

Children

- Offer clear choices throughout the day.
- Take turns with classroom jobs and let children choose from a few options.

Families

- Allow choices around scheduling (like pick-up/drop-off windows when possible, or parent-teacher conference times).
- Invite input through surveys, suggestion boxes, or family meetings about classroom policies or events.

Staff

- Provide options for how and when staff can take breaks, plan time, or attend professional development activities.
- Encourage staff to express ideas or concerns during team meetings and genuinely consider their input.

Peer Support

Children

- Create a “Problem-Solving Wall” with visuals showing peaceful ways to resolve disagreements (e.g., take turns, use kind words, get a timer, walk away).

Families

- Organize informal parent gatherings or support groups.
- Create virtual spaces for parents to share information.

Staff

- Celebrate team successes and acknowledge challenges together.
- Offer time for staff to meet in small and large groups to share experiences and allow them to generate ideas and solutions.

Historical Considerations

Children

- Include artwork that look like their racial, ethnic, and cultural experiences that they can take home.
- Have games and activities that teach children about different cultures.
- Understand that a child’s age or where they are in their development means they will have different beliefs and understanding about a traumatic event.
- Include songs, books, and games that reflect the cultural background of the children in your classroom.

Families

- Learn how to pronounce their names clearly and correctly.
- Ask about their race, ethnic, or cultural preferences, then follow them.
- Consider how family beliefs and values about parenting and about what a child should do vary across cultures.
- Understand that there are different cultural beliefs about the idea of trauma.

Staff

- Have cultural humility training for staff to better understand the backgrounds of the children and families they serve.
- Ensure staff have access to translators and cultural experts to be aware of different communities.

For Help with a Reference

Email iodres@temple.edu

More About this Project

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