Resilience & Learning: Creating Trauma-Sensitive Spaces for Children & Youth

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NC Resilience & Learning Project

- Introductions
- Trauma 101
- Overview of the model: making your program trauma-sensitive/trauma-informed
- Strategies: Brainstorming ways to implement in your afterschool program
Why the focus on trauma?

Think about all of the adversity that children we work with may face:

• Physical, sexual, or emotional abuse
• Chronic neglect
• Caregiver substance abuse or mental illness
• Loss of caregiver (e.g., incarceration, custody change, deployment, death)
• Exposure to violence in communities and homes
• Poverty/homelessness/lack of basic needs
• Chronic illness or severe injury
• Peer aggression
• Natural disasters
Prevalence

Out of over 17,000 survey respondents:

• **64%** reported at least ONE ACE
  
  ▪ **26%** reported **ONE** ACE
  
  ▪ **16%** reported **TWO** ACEs
  
  ▪ **9.5%** reported **THREE** ACEs
  
  ▪ **12.4%** reported **FOUR OR MORE**

https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about.html
Response to Trauma

- *Toxic stress* is caused by prolonged or pronounced stress that overwhelms children’s skills or support

- Stress hormones are released and remain at high levels
- Causes **chemically toxic effects** on brain regions involved in problem solving and decision-making
- Enhances functioning in emotional parts of brain that respond instinctively to threat
Neurobiology & Brain Development

Hippocampus: helps in emotion regulation, ability to store/recall information
Survival Mode

• Leads to a constant state of high alert:
  ▫ Fight – verbal and physical aggression
  ▫ Flight – leave or hide
  ▫ Freeze – shut down, withdraw

• At school/afterschool, trauma can impact:
  ▫ Learning
  ▫ Behavior
  ▫ Relationships
  ▫ Mental Health
Think about a time...

- Have you ever been driving and focused on one thought – maybe your grocery list, what to cook for dinner, your first to-do item at work that day – and all of a sudden someone cuts you off or you have to suddenly slam on your brakes?
  - What does your mind do in that moment?
  - What does your body do in that moment?
  - Are you able to easily go back to the task you were originally thinking about?

This is how children with trauma may feel ALL the time.
Discussion

• How do you experience kids with possible trauma histories in your program?
  ▫ How do you see the fight, flight, freeze response in the children you serve?
  ▫ What behaviors and challenges are evident?
  ▫ What hidden strengths or resilience might they have?

• What are your program’s policies and procedures for kids who disclose traumatic experiences to staff?
Impact

ACEs can lead to:

• Delays and disruption in brain development
• Social and emotional problems
• Short- and long-term mental and physical health problems
• Early death

Deficits linked to trauma

- Trauma responses and toxic stress impact:
  - Behavior regulation
  - Language
  - Memory
  - Perspective taking
  - Understanding of cause and effect

- Harder for these students to:
  - Pay attention/stay on task
  - Regulate emotions
  - Organize work
  - Follow rules
  - Problem solve

- Increased likelihood of office referrals and suspensions
- Lower scores on standardized tests
- 2.5X more likely to be retained
What will help?

- Building trauma-informed, trauma-sensitive environments
  - All adults understand impacts of trauma
  - Focus on relationship-building, structure, and support for skill-building
  - Strategies selected are setting-specific
Early Findings from Trauma-Sensitive Schools

Decrease in:

• Student depression symptoms

• Behavioral outcomes after 1 year:
  • Suspension rates by 30-90%
  • Office referral rates by 20-44%
  • Incidents of physical aggression by 43%

• Behavioral outcomes after 5 years:
  • Suspension rates by 95%

Early Findings from Trauma-Sensitive Schools

Increase in:

• Student self-esteem

• Academic outcomes:
  • Students’ ability to learn by 28%
  • Student time on task while in class by 27%
  • School attendance rate by 34%
  • Test scores

Creating a Trauma-Informed Afterschool Program
What does a trauma-informed environment look like?

WHOLE PROGRAM, WHOLE CHILD, STRENGTHS-BASED approach

This is not a one-time, one-year program, but rather a shift in the way you think and operate long-term.
How do we see these students?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional View</th>
<th>Trauma-informed View</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Impulsive</td>
<td>Difficulty regulating emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aggressive/Defiant</td>
<td>Trauma response triggered, trying to gain control and find safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Withdrawn/”unmotivated”</td>
<td>Afraid, overwhelmed, world is a dangerous place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over-reacting</td>
<td>Seeking to get needs met</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADHD</td>
<td>Lacking necessary skills</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reaction: STUDENT NEEDS TO BE PUNISHED

Reaction: STUDENT NEEDS SKILLS AND SUPPORT
Step One: Understanding Trauma

Ongoing training and discussion to build knowledge and understanding in ALL staff

What does trauma look like?
How does trauma impact development?
How does trauma change the ways that children:

- behave?
- learn?
- interact with others?
Step Two: Identifying Areas of Urgency

What are the biggest behavioral and academic challenges you see?

Why is there an urgency for you to become trauma-sensitive?

Step Three: Brainstorming Strategies

Begin brainstorming and action planning to implement strategies that will help to address areas of urgency
Framework, not a program!

• Solutions are program-specific, led and owned by the program

• Components may include
  ▫ Self-regulation skill-building
  ▫ Leadership capacity/infrastructure
  ▫ Professional development
  ▫ Staff support/self-care
  ▫ Relationship-building with students
  ▫ Clear expectations and routines
  ▫ Structure of environment
  ▫ Tiered system of self-regulation instruction/coaching
  ▫ Discipline policies and procedures
  ▫ Family/community connections
Break-out Groups

For each component, use a separate worksheet to begin brainstorming trauma-sensitive strategies:

- What are you already doing that you want to keep?
- What are you already doing that you want to tweak slightly or change?
- What are you doing that you want to stop doing based on today’s training?
- What are things you want to add and start doing?
Two Keys to Promoting Resilience:

1. Teach skills
2. Build supportive environments
Self-Regulation

To be successful in school and life, we all need to learn to manage our:

- thoughts
- feelings
- behaviors

Self-Regulation Skills

• Managing Emotion
  ▫ Identifying feelings in self and others
  ▫ Managing frustration and distress effectively
  ▫ Empathy, compassion

• Managing Thoughts
  ▫ Controlling attention
  ▫ Setting goals, planning
  ▫ Problem-solving
  ▫ Self-talk
  ▫ Perspective-taking

• Managing Behavior
  ▫ Following rules and directions
  ▫ Controlling impulses
  ▫ Persisting on hard tasks
  ▫ Enacting coping skills
  ▫ Delaying gratification
Self-Regulation as a Skill like Literacy

• Characteristics of both:
  ▫ Many sub-skills
  ▫ Require developmentally appropriate instruction over time
  ▫ Develop earlier in supportive environments
  ▫ Can be acquired later with intervention
  ▫ Multiple intervention opportunities exist
  ▫ Some youth need more specialized instruction and support than others
Strategies to Support Skill Development: in collaboration with school

- Screening/Assessment for behavioral or social-emotional challenge

- RTI tiered approach for teaching social-emotional skills
  - Tier 1: Universal (like “Second Step”)
  - Targeted Tier 2: Individual or group support
  - Tier 3: Intensive support, referral to community partners
Strategies to Support Skill Development

- Group meeting or SEL-focused empowerment time 2-5 days/wk
- Mindfulness breaks
- Calm-down spaces
- De-escalation training for staff
- Program-wide self-regulation/feelings messaging
Coaching Self-Regulation

- Use of words to identify and express emotion
- Awareness of rising anger or frustration
- Use of calm-down strategies (practiced in advance!)
- Consideration of others’ perspectives
- Problem-solving basic social situations
- Focusing attention
- Persisting on hard tasks
- Breaking tasks down into smaller pieces
Two Keys to Promoting Resilience:

1. Teach skills
2. Build supportive environment
Positive Climate: What does it look like?

Space?

Meetings?

Staff?

Entrance?

Discipline?

Structure?

Parents?

Students?
Strategies to Support Staff

- Training on ACEs, Learning, Behavior, and staff self-care
- **Staff Self-Care**
  - Buddy/mentor system
  - Staff self-care thermometer
  - Staff group activities/meals
  - Staff wellness initiative through a local healthcare provider with a weekly yoga class
- **Staff Climate**
  - Communication tone, relationships
  - Staff shout-out box
  - Staff of the month recognition program
Strategies for Building Relationships

- Sticky note activity
- Student survey
- Daily greetings by name
- Organized check-in/check-out system
  - Ask about interests, how things are going
- Positive comments
  - At least 5:1 ratio of positive to negative interactions
- Smiles, positive connections
- Mentor programs for boys and girls
- Special interest clubs
Structure: Expectations & Routines

- Clear, concrete rules and expectations program-wide
  - Post visual cues, reminders
- Predictable routines
  - Emphasize rules for transition times
  - Extra support for “off-schedule” times
- Catch students being good
- Limit opportunities for risky/undesirable behavior
Structure: Physical Space

• Structure your space
  ▫ Limit clutter, distractions

• Calm-down areas or routines

• Awareness of “trouble zones”, times, or activities that trigger problems

• Staff presence during transitions and free time

• Physical ambiance
  ▫ Paint colors?
  ▫ Posters?
  ▫ Music during transitions?
  ▫ Gardens, plants, flowers?
  ▫ Enlist students to help!
When you are in a stressful interaction:
- Pay attention to your own feelings
- View problem-behaviors with a trauma-focused lens

Use strategies to stay calm and steady in the face of strong student emotion:
- Reassure and calm/comfort, if appropriate
- Give time and space to calm down; reduce emotional intensity in conflict situations

Redirect with calm, firm reminders:
- Provide consequences calmly and with respect
- Communicate that you believe the student will make a better choice next time

Consider training in de-escalation techniques
When are good times to help youth calm down?
Discipline & Behavior Management

- Be proactive – Identify problem triggers so you can avoid behavior problems.
- Review discipline policies and procedures. Create a clear and concise behavior matrix or flow-chart.
- Use a “reflection” writing assignment or discussion when kids showing behavior problems or need to express feelings
  - Gives kids a chance to tell their story of what happened
  - Helps them refocus on better choices and goals for next time
- Create a discipline “script” to use with students
  - Incorporate collaborative problem-solving
- Restorative justice practices
Sample Reflection Sheet

What happened?

How did it make you feel?

How big of a problem is this?

Knowing how to label our emotions will help us to gain better control over how we react to situations.
Sample Reflection Sheet

How could you have handled the situation differently?

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________

Have you been sent to choices for this type of action before?

☑ Yes ☐ No

How could your teacher support you in making a different choice in the future?

__________________________________________________________________________

☐ Move me away from my friends

☐ Give me a warning before sending me out
Policies & Procedures

• Discipline policies
  ▫ Focus on context
  ▫ Look for alternatives to suspension

• Family communication
  ▫ Weekly calls/emails that include celebrations and positive, supportive info
Community Connections

• Afterschool/teacher connections
• Parent engagement
• Collaboration with community mental health providers
• Resource center for families
• Community Resource Guide
Next Steps

• How could you take this back to the rest of your team and staff?

• What is one thing you wrote down that you want to commit to trying or doing differently?
Questions

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