

# Trauma-Informed Schools

Tackling the impact of trauma on teaching, learning, and behaviour

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Trauma is an important topic in the education world in Ireland in 2022, as a result of Covid-19 and the refugee crisis from the war in Ukraine. But we have always had children and adults in our schools who have experienced trauma. So what does 'trauma-informed' mean, and how does it look in practice? This article examines the types of trauma in our schools, how they manifest, and what training and knowledge are needed to create a trauma-informed school community where everyone can thrive and learn.



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## Introduction

2022 has been a year when schools in Ireland have had to operate in an increasingly uncertain world. The ongoing effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, war in Ukraine, a looming world recession, and the impact of climate change have been traumatic and anxiety-provoking.

This has led to increased interest in staff training on the links between trauma, learning, and behaviour in school. At Trauma Responsive Education we are working with schools on understanding these links and using a trauma-informed lens to gain new insights and ways forward.

It should be remembered that trauma in the school population is not new. There have always been students, families, and indeed teachers who have been affected by various types of trauma, often not diagnosed or immediately apparent.

Adopting a trauma-informed approach can help schools to support any member of the school community affected by visible or invisible trauma. Essentially it aims to allow as many students as possible to have real access to and engagement in learning.

## A trauma-informed approach

A trauma-informed approach involves school staff understanding the theory underlying the approach, and working together at whole-school and individual level to put the theory into practice. It does not necessarily mean that schools have to reinvent the wheel, but it might involve rethinking some common practices.

From a psychological perspective, trauma can be defined as follows:

*Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening with lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional or spiritual wellbeing. (SAMHSA, 2014, p.7)*

Most people recognise that world events such as war and pandemics can cause this kind of trauma, but trauma can be defined more broadly. Schools have students in classes with experience of less public traumas, such as loss, separation, violence (in the home or community), abuse, displacement, homelessness, physical or mental illness in the family, a family member in prison, living in poverty, or simply chaotic circumstances where nothing is certain.

### Recognising trauma in the classroom

The signs of trauma are not always immediately obvious in a classroom situation and can lead to students being wrongly labelled as 'lazy', 'disengaged', or 'disruptive'. It is important that staff recognise how trauma might show up in their classroom. Possible signs include:

- anxiety, fear, and worry about safety of self and others
- unexplained changes in behaviour
- over- or under-reaction to sudden noises
- becoming withdrawn and not engaging
- becoming aggressive and defiant
- changes in academic performance and motivation
- increased risk-taking behaviour
- continually talking and writing about death and destruction
- inability to regulate their emotional states.

A trauma-informed school is where all the adults in the school community – administrators, teachers, special needs assistants, caretakers, and so on – can recognise these signs and respond appropriately to those who have been affected by traumatic stress.

The school recognises that a child's (or staff member's) behaviour is a developmental response to some past experience and can respond with flexibility when required. Instead of asking, 'What is wrong with this student?' and immediately labelling them, the adults ask themselves, 'What might have happened that explains this behaviour?'

Trauma affects the brain and body and thus can be a block to learning. Knowledge of the latest developments in neuroscience can help school staff understand why some students are struggling with learning and behaviour. Trauma affects a student's ability to feel safe, trust the adults in class, and settle to learn.

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## The brain

Recognising which part of the brain a student is operating from can offer staff insights into strategies to help them. The brain stem is the oldest part of the brain and operates at a basic survival level, defending against real or perceived threats. Students affected by trauma are easily triggered into this part of their brain, which shows up in the classroom as overreactions or sometimes aggressive or withdrawn behaviour. Triggers can be loud noises, sudden changes in routine, or simply making a mistake in an exercise. In this mode, students need help with physical regulation, for example through activities that connect to the senses, breathing exercises, or physical stress-release exercises.

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The limbic system, or mammalian brain, is responsible for emotions. When a student is overwhelmed by feelings, this part of the brain is over-activated. They are unable to discuss what is wrong or to name what is happening for them, making it impossible to learn. When in this mode, children need positive relationship, an adult who is attuned to them, who can name and acknowledge their feelings and get alongside them.

The neocortex is the thinking and reasoning part of the brain. Schools usually operate on the assumption that everyone is in their ‘thinking brain’, whereas trauma can cause this part of the brain to go ‘offline’. There is no point trying to reason with a student who is not in their thinking brain. They will need support to get back into it.

Toxic stress arises when there is too much cortisol in the body, affecting the executive functioning of the brain, which is responsible for working memory, self-regulation, and organisation. Good executive functioning is essential for learning. Students who struggle with this find it difficult to remember instructions, copy from the board, recall what they have just read, motivate themselves to complete a task, and organise their work. A trauma-informed approach works on lowering cortisol to allow learning to take place.

## Theory into practice

Understanding this theory can give schools a framework for thinking about children who are struggling with their learning and behaviour as a result of trauma. School itself can be a protective factor for these children, by working on the following areas:

### Relationships

Providing a relationship with at least one ‘good-enough’ caring adult, with continual small doses of positive relationships and interactions, can change the wiring of the traumatised brain over time.

It is important to give children someone or some way to make sense of their experience, to understand why it happened or is happening. Children

need staff who can get alongside them, listen, hear, and acknowledge what is being said. This involves the skill of listening to understand rather than listening to reply and offer advice. It can feel difficult for teaching staff who want to 'fix' things, and it can feel overwhelming to hear some children's stories. Acknowledging and being able to name feelings for a student is a vital part of being trauma-informed.

### **Safety**

Students affected by trauma need to have a sense of 'felt' and physical safety. On a physical level, this involves looking at school buildings and thinking how they might seem to anyone who is feeling vulnerable. Schools might consider, for example, what it is like to enter as a parent or carer: Are they immediately made to feel welcome? Where are they asked to sit: in a 'fishbowl' room where everyone who passes can see who is waiting, or even outside the principal's office like a naughty child? Where are the safe places, the nooks and crannies, for a student to go to self-regulate and be with an emotionally available adult?

### **Safe boundaries**

This does not mean there are no rules in a trauma-informed school. A common misconception is that trauma-informed approaches are 'soft' and allow students to do what they want without consequences. Safety is created by having clear rules managed by calm, regulated adults who can contain and manage feelings through strong relationships. School rules need to be linked to the inclusive values and explicitly linked to safety. The question needs to be asked: In order for us all to feel safe and be able to learn and have fun, what rules do we need in here?

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### **Predictability/Routine**

Routine and predictability can minimise uncertainty and curb the need to be on high alert for danger. Plans need to be created for students who cannot manage sudden changes or transitions. This needs to be balanced with an ability to be flexible when necessary to respond to children who are having difficulties.

### **Connection and belonging**

Feeling connected to others creates safety, decreases fear, and allows learning to take place in a group. Trauma-informed schools exploit all opportunities to emphasise connections, share experiences, and create a strong school community.

### **Choice**

Trauma can make children feel helpless and powerless, causing them to seek to exert power in school. Without realising it, teaching staff can become drawn into unnecessary power struggles with these students, who need instead to be given choices wherever possible. Staff need to stay in the learning zone and not be drawn into the battle zone.

**Fun**

Having fun is very important. Through play and fun we release important hormones such as serotonin, which we need to feel calm, happy, and settled to learn.

**Language**

Using language positively to connect with students can have a big impact. For example, when a child is late, the difference between a negative comment ('Late again – that's the third time this week. It's not good enough') and a positive welcome ('Good to see you. Is everything all right?') makes a vast difference, especially to a traumatised child. Reframing our language about a student can also be powerful. For example, an attention-seeking child might be a connection-seeking child. Changing the language may change the approach.

**Whole-school approach**

Becoming a trauma-informed school is not a short-term objective to be addressed in a one-off continuing professional development event. It needs to be part of a longer-term whole-school development plan and linked with complementary initiatives. Many schools are running a range of programmes which already support this approach, such as Incredible Years, Roots of Empathy, Restorative Practice, Emotion Coaching, and Nurture Groups. Auditing current practice is a good place to start, noticing what is already being done that is working and looking at ways to improve.

Policies need to be viewed through a trauma lens. For example, some schools are moving from behaviour-management policies to relationship policies, asking: 'In order for everyone to feel safe and learn, how do we want to relate and behave towards each other?'

Real attention needs to be paid to staff wellbeing. Secondary trauma can become a serious issue, potentially leading to burnout. A trauma-informed school acknowledges this and provides opportunities to remedy it, for example through facilitated supervision for staff to reflect on the impact of their work on themselves.

**Conclusion**

Covid-19 has highlighted the need for schools to adopt a trauma-informed approach, but it must be acknowledged that layers of trauma have always existed in classrooms. Recognising, naming, and working with this can only be a positive step forward for the whole school community.

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**REFERENCE**

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (2014) *SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach*. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884. Rockville, Maryland: SAMHSA.

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