
A Trauma-Informed Lens to Understand Children's Behavior

INSTRUCTIONS

This handout was designed for use with the handout "Trauma, Health, and Behavior" by the Minnesota Association for Children's Mental Health. The questions and activities in this handout could be used in a work session (e.g., professional learning community, professional development session), for individual coaching, or for self-reflection.

Goals

- ◆ Understand that young children exposed to trauma may exhibit behaviors (externalizing and internalizing) that are maladaptive in the classroom.
- ◆ Discuss the importance of your own self-regulation when supporting the behavior of children exposed to trauma.
- ◆ Explore co-regulation as an effective way to support the behavior of children exposed to trauma.

Activity

- ◆ Read the handout.
 - There are three brief, informative videos linked throughout the document. If possible, watch the videos as you read through the handout.
- ◆ After reading the handout and watching the videos, use the questions below to reflect on how using a trauma-informed lens can support the classroom behavior of children exposed to trauma.
- ◆ Implement your plan and adjust as needed to support children's behavior.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- ◆ Young children exposed to trauma express their feelings through their behavior. Some children may show “fight or flee behaviors,” that may feel challenging to us in the moment. Other children may internalize their feelings by “freezing,” which may feel less disruptive to classroom activities.
 - Think about each child in your classroom. Do you know if they have been exposed to trauma? If so, do those children tend to display more externalizing or internalizing behaviors?
 - In what ways do you think these children may be misunderstood (if externalizing) or overlooked (if internalizing)?
 - What teaching practices, if any, have worked for you in the past to tune into these children’s needs?
 - Talk to a colleague to share ideas about ways to interpret children’s behaviors in the context of their experiences.

- ◆ To effectively respond to behaviors that we find challenging, “we need to first recognize how these behaviors might be affecting *our* ability to cope.” Use the questions below to reflect:
 - Remember a situation in which you responded to a child’s behavior from a place of anger/frustration.
 - How did you express your emotions? How did the child react to your response? Did your response support that child’s regulation needs? Why or why not?
 - What helps you regulate in the classroom when a child’s externalizing behavior pushes your buttons?
 - Identify and share at least one concrete strategy that you use to regulate your own emotions when a child displays an externalizing behavior that you find challenging (i.e., take a moment, power down, be present).
 - As you hear from colleagues, select one new strategy to try. How will using this new strategy help you support that child’s regulatory needs?
 - Plan for how you will remind yourself to use this new self-regulation strategy before responding to an externalizing behavior.

- ◆ This resource offers three co-regulation strategies for building relationships and supporting children exposed to trauma when they exhibit behaviors that we find challenging or when they are internalizing emotions: comfort, connection, and collaboration. Identify one strategy that you want to use the next time a child demonstrates a behavior you find challenging.
 - How will you remind yourself to use this strategy?
 - What additional resources or support do you need to use this strategy? How will you access those resources or support?
 - Regularly check in on your use of the strategy and adjust as needed.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Learn more about supporting classroom behavior of children exposed to trauma:

- ◆ **Source:** UC Berkeley's Greater Good in Education
- ◆ **Blog:** Strategies for Teacher Well-being
- ◆ **Link:** <https://ggie.berkeley.edu/trauma-trauma-informed-and-resiliency-informed-schools/>
- ◆ **Description:** Children exposed to trauma need teachers' co-regulation to learn how to regulate their emotions and behaviors. Co-regulation requires that you regulate yourself before supporting children. This blog shares evidence-based strategies for you to take care of yourself.

- ◆ **Source:** Teachstone
- ◆ **Webinar:** The Impact of Trauma on Behavior: Seeing Children's Actions as Communication
- ◆ **Link:** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G_mZYIpr9II
- ◆ **Description:** In this webinar, you will dive deeper into understanding how trauma impacts young children's behavior. The presenters discuss: (1) how behaviors are a child's way to share their experiences and communicate with us and (2) how reframing children's behavior help us better support them in the classroom.

- ◆ **Source:** Edutopia
- ◆ **Article:** Supporting Students Living in Foster Care
- ◆ **Link:** <https://www.edutopia.org/article/supporting-students-living-foster-care>
- ◆ **Description:** Young children in foster care may experience behavior challenges in their classrooms. Learn more about how you can understand the past experiences of children in foster care. Use the suggested supportive practices to foster a safe and comfortable early childhood classroom environment.