

The Impact of Trauma on Schools

Creating a more sensitive school and community environment



November 14, 2023



Today's Speaker



Scott Bloom, LCSW

- 33 years in the mental health field working with children and families.
- Created opportunities for children and youth to overcome emotional and behavioral barriers to academic achievement, multiple community agencies.
- Founding Director of School Mental Health Services for the New York City Department of Education for the last 15 years
- Serves on advisory boards for cities, state, and national mental health initiatives around the country.



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Program Overview

- A 2-year program funded by the New York Community Trust and The New York State Health Foundation, serving 10 Sponsoring Organizations (SOs) each year.
 - Grant year runs for entire calendar year, e.g., January – December 2023
- Goal: To enhance the capacity of the New York State's School-Based Health Centers (SBHCs) to respond to the increase in students' behavioral health needs resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.



Presentation Objectives

- Define Trauma
- Trauma Focused Approach
- Behaviors Through a Trauma Lens
- Look at the relationship between triggers and trauma response
- Impact of Trauma on Students & Schools
- Think about ways to make schools and communities more sensitive to trauma
- Q & A



Defining Trauma

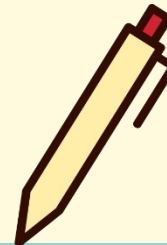
The “Three E’s”

Trauma is...

...an **event**, series of events, or set of circumstances...

...**experienced** by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening...

...and that has lasting negative **effects** on that individual’s life.



Some Things to Remember About Trauma

Crisis and Trauma are not the same

- Crisis is typically an event that leads to danger or the potential for danger
- May or may not result in trauma
- Often does not include ongoing, chronic stress (e.g., years of exposure to domestic violence)
- Traumatic event – Crisis that causes trauma to individual/community

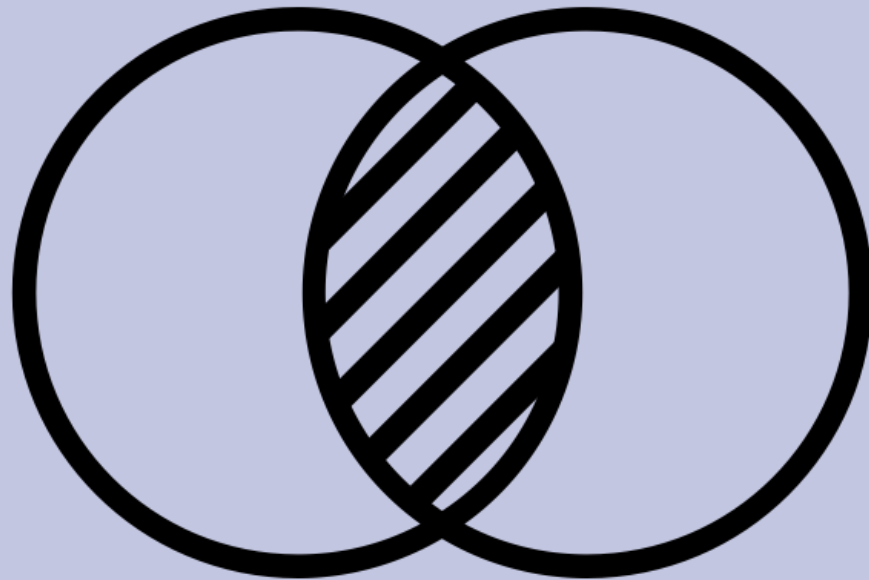
All of these things impact our students

MOST students are very resilient in the face of traumatic events

Not ALL problems are due to traumatic events

Complex Trauma

The term **complex trauma** refers to exposure to multiple traumatic events from an early age, **and** the immediate and long-term effects of these experiences over development.



Why is a trauma-focused approach important?

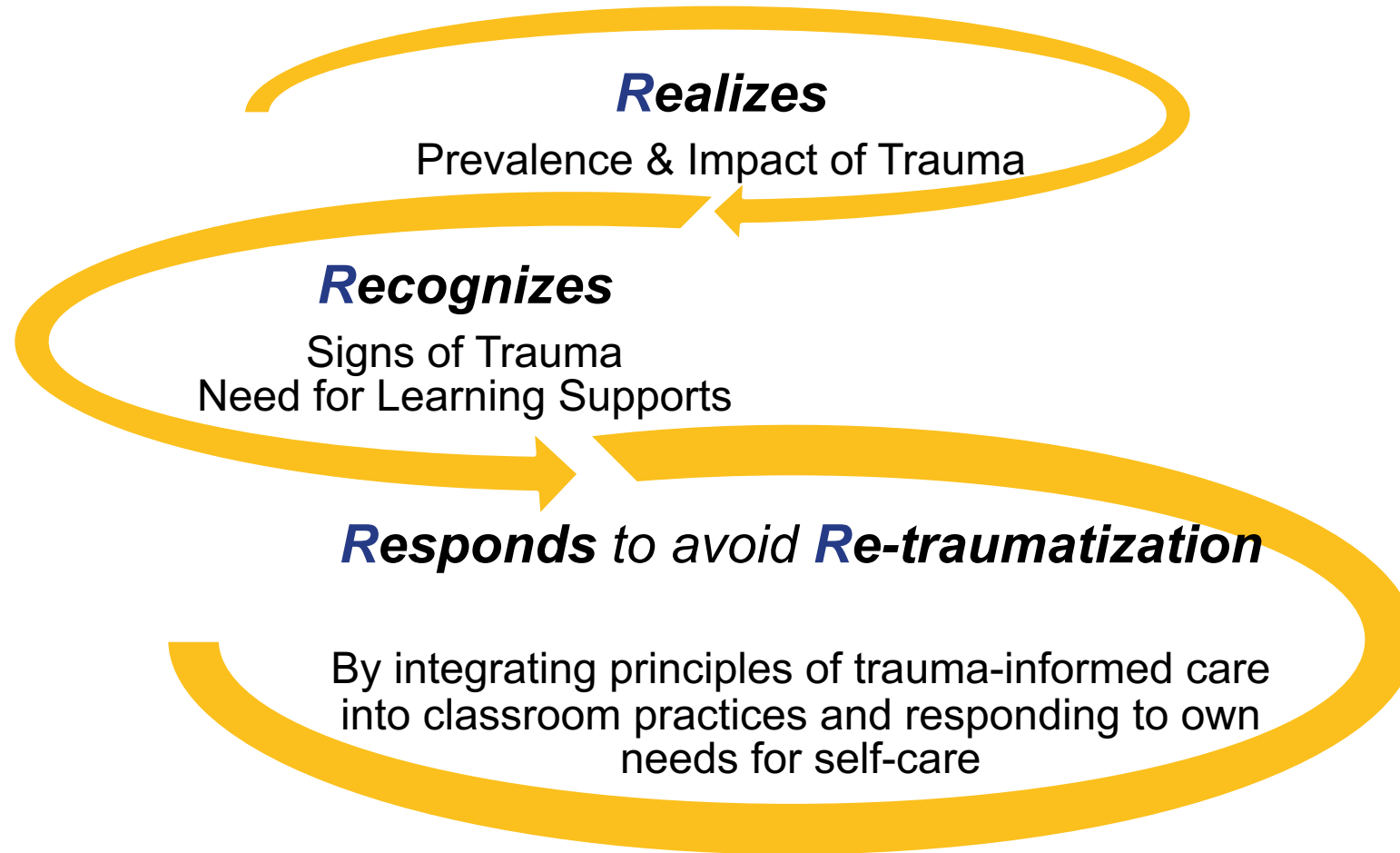
- More youth are experiencing traumatic events
 - Community violence
 - Natural and technological disasters
 - Terrorism
 - Family and interpersonal violence
- Most youth with mental health needs do not seek treatment
- Many internalizing disorders (i.e., anxiety and depression) in children go undetected
- We tend to focus on the acting out



Children Who Experience Trauma Are More Likely To;

- Develop Childhood Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
- Experience problems with friends and family
- Develop emotional and behavioral problems
- Perform worse in school

What is a Trauma-Informed School?



Paradigm Shift



Create a common understanding of trauma and its impacts.

Paradigm Shift

Responds to avoid **Re-traumatization**

By integrating principles of trauma-informed care into classroom practices and responding to own needs for self-care

Why is a trauma-focused approach important?

Trauma experiences take a toll on academic achievement



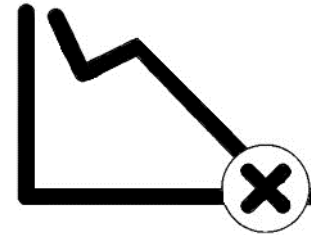
Decreased
IQ and
reading
ability



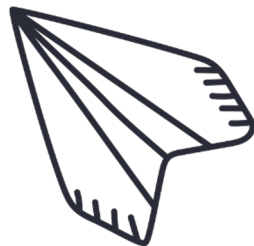
Decreased
high-school
graduation
rates



More days
absent from
school



Lower GPA



More
suspensions,
expulsions

Why is a trauma-focused approach important?

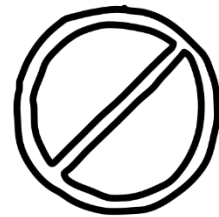
Impaired social and behavioral functioning in and out of school



Safety, security, attachment outside of school has been disrupted



Impacts worldview- people cannot be trusted, world is a dangerous place, no one loves/care for me



Behavior

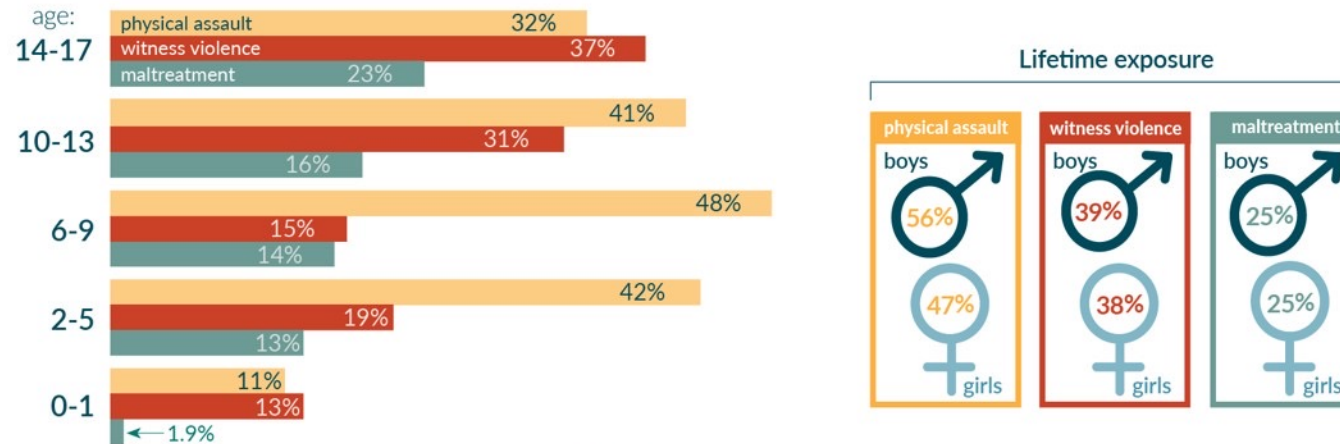
- Guarded, slow to trust
- Overreact to real or perceived injustices
- “Re-enact” stress or trauma
- Act out
- Hard to have relationships with others

Prevalence of Childhood Trauma

2 of 3 children & youth were exposed to violence in the past year

Of these, **50%** report *more than 1 form of victimization* | **1 in 6** report *6 or more exposures to violence*

physical assault, witnessing violence, and maltreatment are common



Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study

1 in 5 adults report **3 or more** adverse experiences as children



Adverse experiences include:

- Physical abuse, emotional abuse, and sexual abuse
- Emotional and physical neglect
- Household substance abuse
- Household mental illness
- A mother treated violently
- Parent separation or divorce
- Incarcerated household member

As rates of adverse childhood experiences go up, so does **high risk behavior, illness, and early death**

Sources: Finkelhor, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2015; Child Trends, 2016; Felitti, Anda, Nordenberg, Williamson, Spitz, Edwards . . . & Marks, 1998

Groups at increased risk of exposure to trauma

- Youth of color ages 12 to 19
- African American youth living in urban, low-income communities
- American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) children and youth
- Children and youth with disabilities
- Refugees
- Children and youth who are homeless and living in poverty
- LGBTQ children and youth



ALERT
DANGEROUS!

ALERT
DANGEROUS!

ALERT
DANGEROUS!

ALERT
DANGEROUS!

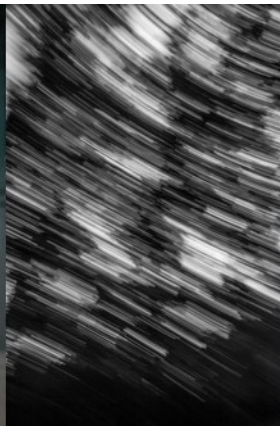
Triggers

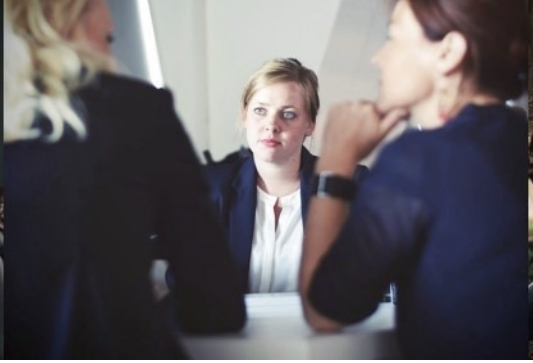
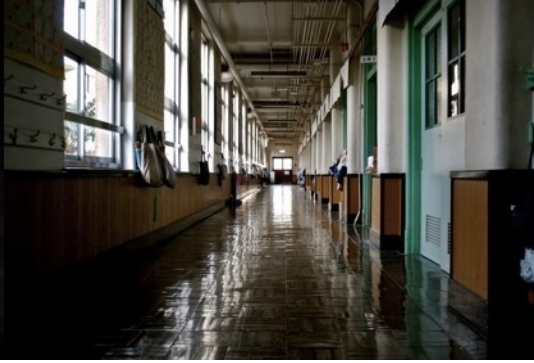


- Reminders of past traumatic experiences that automatically cause the body to react as if the traumatic event is happening again in that moment
- Responses can appear confusing and out of place and be misunderstood by others

Common Triggers for Youth

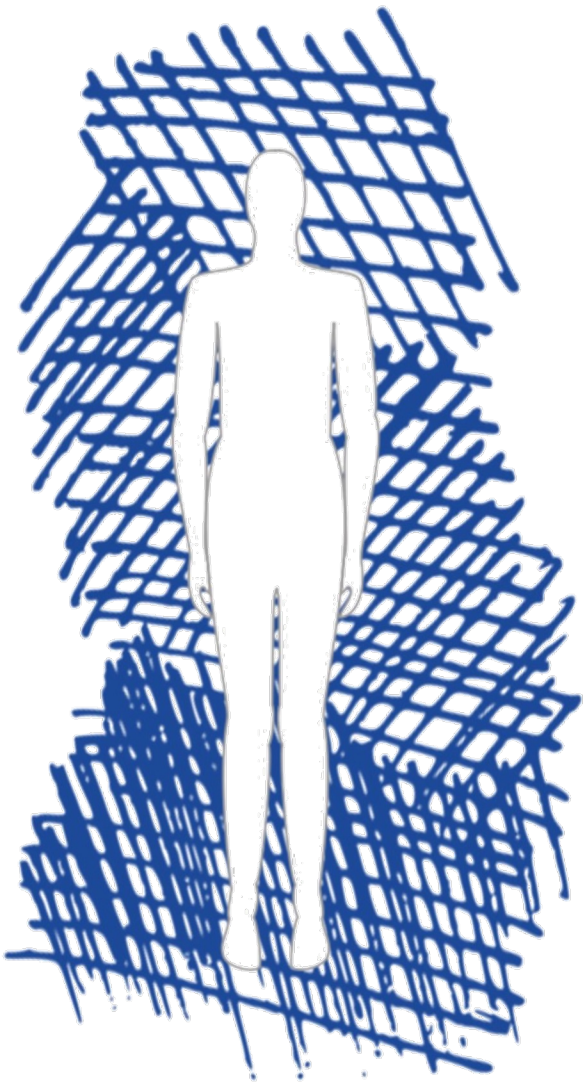
- Loud noises
- Physical touch
- Threatening gestures
- Authority figures and limit-setting
- Chaos or uncertainty
- Particular spaces (e.g., bathrooms or areas that are less monitored)
- Changes in routine
- Witnessing violence between others, such as peers fighting
- Emergency vehicles and police or fire personnel
- Certain smells
- Particular times of year



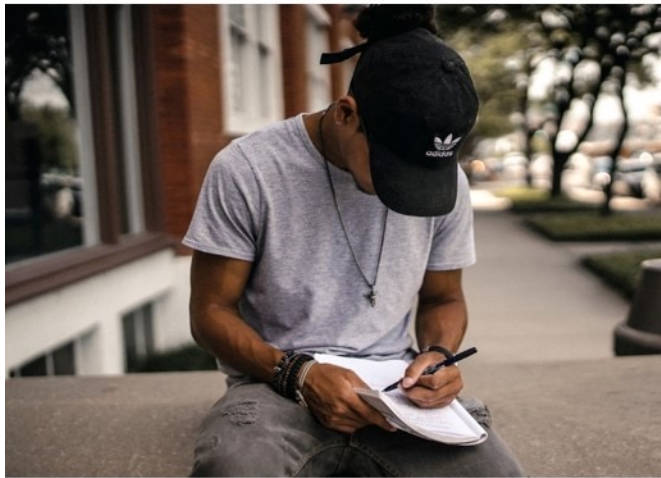


Common Triggers for Parents/Caregivers

- Returning to the school environment
- Shame or embarrassment
- Becoming confused during meetings
- Fear of becoming involved in child welfare or another system
- Staff members or situations that remind them of past events or people
- Helplessness and loss of control

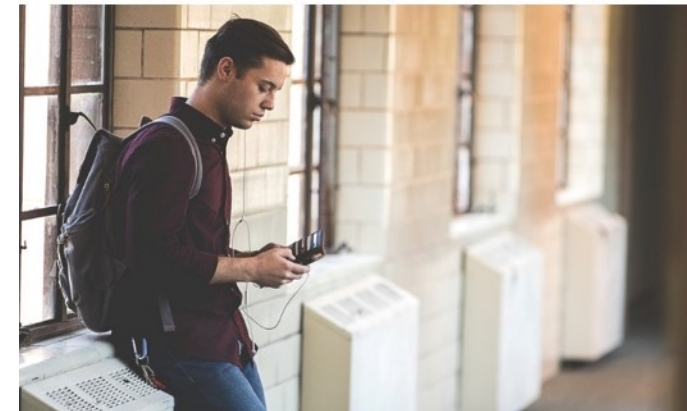


TRAUMA SYMPTOMS	CLASSROOM IMPACT
Nightmares/trouble sleeping	Fatigue, sleepiness
Thinking about it all the time	Trouble concentrating, tearfulness, re-enacting the trauma in play
Wanting not to think about it	Trouble sitting still, creating distractions, avoid discussion
Avoiding people, place, & things (reminders)	Avoiding certain activities, people, places seemingly for now reason
Feeling scared for no reason/	Upset easily
Feeling “crazy” or out of control	Upset easily
Feeling “on guard” like something bad is about to happen	Alert at all times; jumpy, reactions to noises, unpredictability
Feeling anger	Oppositional, fights with peers
Feeling shame, guilt, bad about oneself	Withdrawal from peers, negative self talk
Having physical health problems	Nurse visits, absenteeism, headaches, stomachaches



Impact of Trauma on Students

- Difficulty paying attention and learning
- More time out of the classroom
- Increased isolation
- School absences
- More suspensions or expulsions
- Higher referral rates to special education
- Poor test scores and an increased risk of failing grades



Impact of Trauma on Parents

- Difficulty managing emotions and controlling behaviors when interacting with school staff
- Difficulty forming relationships
- Increased risk for substance abuse, depression, and PTSD that negatively impact parenting
- Trouble managing stress related to their child's difficult behaviors
- Feelings of embarrassment, shame, fear, or guilt about their child's behaviors or needs
- Difficulty helping their children cope



Impact of Trauma on Staff



Watch out for **Secondary Traumatic Stress** and **Vicarious Trauma!**

Staff may experience:

- Increased anxiety
- Reduced energy and focus
- Trouble regulating emotions
- Difficulty managing responses to students and parents
- Difficulty maintaining positive relationships with students and parents
- Poor attendance or work performance



Impact Of Trauma On Schools

- **Students more likely to escalate**
- **Adults more reactive, controlling, and punitive**
- **Negative impact on school safety and culture**
- **Increased risk for harm**
- **Decrease in academic achievement**

Resilience

A positive, adaptive response to significant adversity

Children can show resilience during one type of situation but not another.



Schools play an important role in fostering student resilience.



No matter the circumstances, children who face extreme adversity will likely be significantly impacted and require support.



Children do not develop the capacity to positively adapt to challenges on their own.



Coping skills can be developed at any age.

A sense of mastery over
life circumstances

Strong executive function
and self-regulation skills

Safe and supportive
environments (schools and
communities)

Adaptable, caring, and
supportive relationship
with an adult



Affirming faith or cultural
traditions

Elements of Resilience

Risk and Protective Factors

Individual Factors

- History of previous exposure to trauma
- Age of trauma exposure
- Gender
- Cognitive ability
- Self-efficacy
- Biology

Environmental Factors

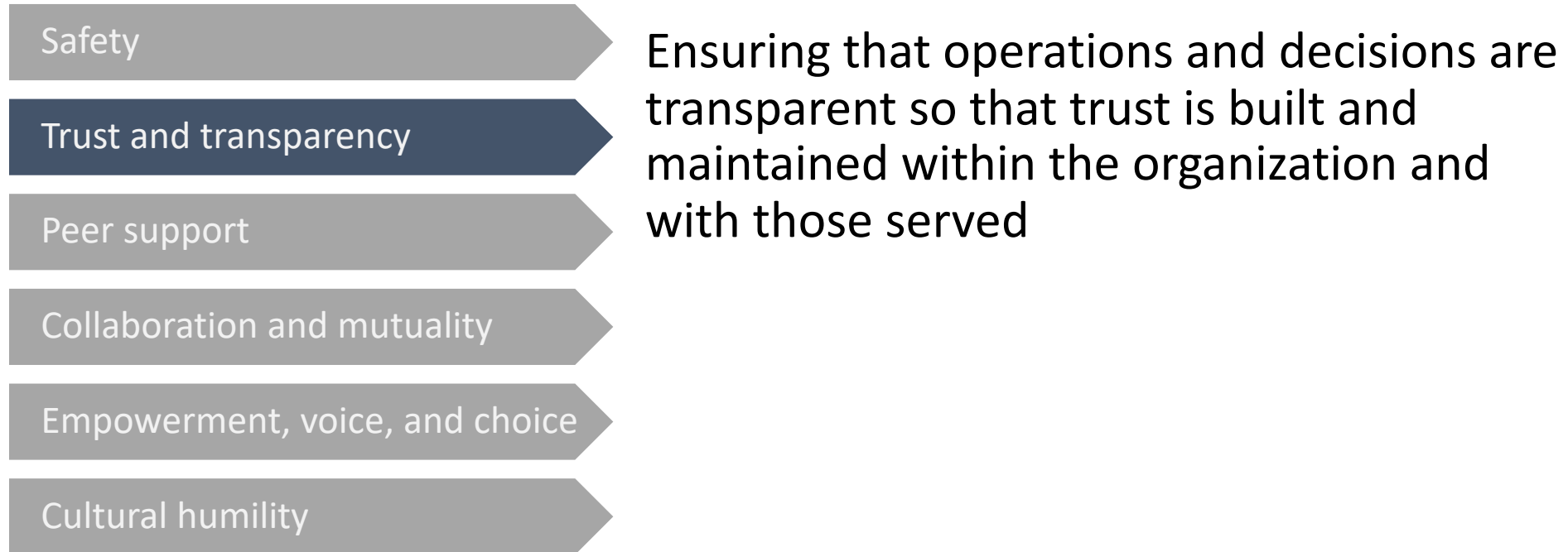
- Nature of the traumatic event
- Proximity to the traumatic event
- Culture and ethnicity
- Level of social support
- Quality of parent-child relationships, parent mental health, and parental history of trauma
- Health of the broader community

There are six key foundations of trauma-informed schools



Promoting a sense of physical and psychological safety throughout the organization, including understanding how “safety” is defined by those served

There are six key foundations of trauma-informed schools



There are six key foundations of trauma-informed schools

Safety

Trust and transparency

Peer support

Collaboration and mutuality

Empowerment, voice, and choice

Cultural humility

Understanding that peers who have experienced traumatic events are key supports in the trauma recovery and healing of others

There are six key foundations of trauma-informed schools

Safety

Trust and transparency

Peer support

Collaboration and mutuality

Empowerment, voice, and choice

Cultural humility

Ensuring that relationships among all parties (e.g., staff to staff, student to staff, parent to staff) are collaborative and that power and decision making are meaningfully shared

There are six key foundations of trauma-informed schools

Safety

Trust and transparency

Peer support

Collaboration and mutuality

Empowerment, voice, and choice

Cultural humility

Understanding the history of diminished voices and eliminating power differentials to support choice in goal-setting and cultivate the skill of self-advocacy

There are six key foundations of trauma-informed schools

Safety

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Peer support

Collaboration and mutuality

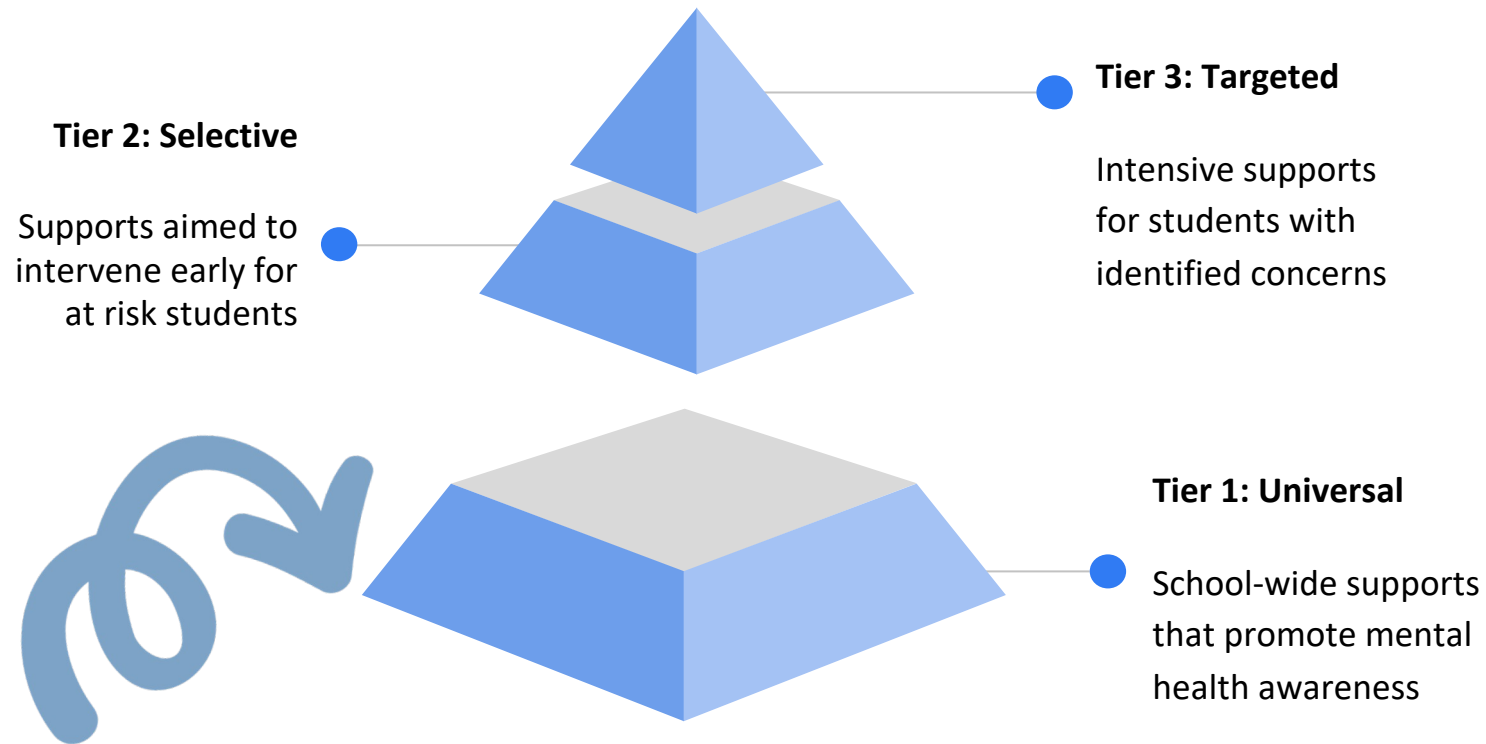
Empowerment, voice, and choice

Cultural humility

Rejecting cultural stereotypes and biases and leveraging access to connections that are responsive to the racial, ethnic, and cultural needs of those served

Classroom Prevention and Intervention

Three-Tiered Model



Tier 1/Universal strategies and programs help us:

- Recognize common student triggers (loud/chaotic environments)
- Build staff capacity
- Create and maintain predictable routines and expectations
- Promote positive school environment

What can we do in the classroom?

Trauma informed classrooms are effective classrooms

What does your school already do?

- Positive Climate
- Predictability/Structure
Agendas, routines
- Choices and Consistency
- Proactive vs Reactive classroom approaches
Restorative practices, positive reinforcement systems
- Social emotional learning (SEL) programs
- Mindfulness and resiliency building
Help signals, peaceful spaces, relaxation exercises

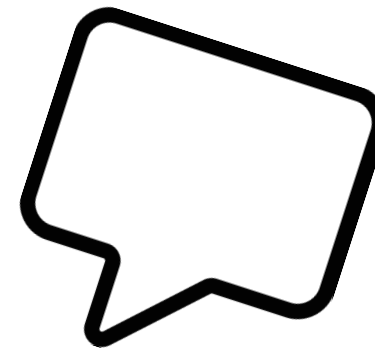
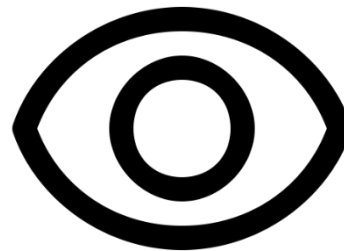
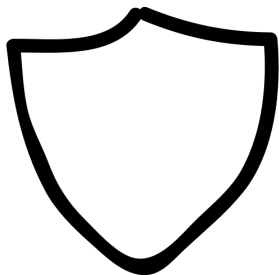
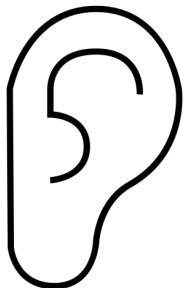
AND

Continue to have Academic Expectations
They build a resiliency focus!



What can we do individually?

Listen Protect Connect Model and Teach



Strategies	Why
Listen	Helps us to have empathy; not be as reactive in the moment; disruptive behavior may be driven by fear/anxiety
Protect	Students may have lost control in their lives/live in chaos; choices (that you are comfortable with) give them some control
Connect	Bring safety into an unpredictable world
Model	Brings sense of safety; helps us to not be as reactive in the moment and calm everyone down first
Teach	Students may “replay” trauma in interactions with others (e.g., fights)

The Power of Personal Connections

- Positive, supportive social relationships can serve as an “antidote” to trauma.
 - Communicate to students that they are safe and that they belong in the academic community.
 - Help re-sculpt brain architecture by helping students turn down their survival brain.
 - Model safe, trusting relationships.



TBG

The Power of Personal Connections

- Perceived teacher support **reduces odds of severe traumatic stress reactions** in adolescents exposed to community violence (Gupta et al., Soc Psychiatry & Psychiatric Epidemiol, 50:539-547, 2015).
- Perceived teacher support predicts **higher hope and less internalizing and externalizing problems** among adolescents exposed to community violence (Ludwig & Warren, Psyc in the Schools, 46:1061-1073, 2009).



Staff Support

- A standard approach for building staff awareness of compassion fatigue and STS which include providing tools for self-monitoring and building self-care strategies.
- Staff peer support for working with trauma exposed students
- Availability of on-campus resources for staff working with trauma exposed students

Using a Culturally-Sensitive and Trauma-Informed Lens

Moving from “What is wrong with them?”



“What have they been through?”

Context is important

- History with the child welfare system
- Immigration
- Poverty
- Racial and historical/family experiences

Experiences with discrimination and marginalization impact students

- Lower access to opportunities
- Fewer pathways to success



Looking at student behavior with a culturally-sensitive and trauma-informed lens allows students with more opportunity for success!

Acknowledgements

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Questions



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