



# Trauma-Informed Support for Students

## Competency

Educators understand and apply the physiological, psychological, and behavioral impact of trauma on students.

## Key Method

Educators will use their understanding of trauma-informed pedagogy to create and implement intervention strategies that can be used with individuals or in a small group setting.

## Method Components

What is Trauma?

According to the Trauma-Informed Care Implementation Resource Center, trauma “results from exposure to an incident or series of events that are emotionally disturbing or life-threatening.”

These events, and a person’s response to them, can lead to lasting adverse effects on how they function—impacting their mental, physical, social, emotional, and/or spiritual well-being. Traumatic experiences can include abuse, neglect, sudden separation from a loved one, poverty, racism, discrimination, violence, war, natural disasters, and more. Traumatic experiences can also include other forms of social oppression, such as sexism, heterosexism, transphobia, ableism, etc.

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Historical trauma is also a part of the broader definition of trauma. It is loosely defined by the cumulative harm to a group caused by a historical event (such as genocide, violent colonization, slavery) and whose effects impact multiple generations.

Children who experience trauma can enter your class believing that the world and even school is a scary place and that trusting others is risky. Some children may be most impacted by racism and other forms of oppression through their experiences in schools that have policies and practices that overwhelmingly harm students of color, LGBTQ+ and other historically marginalized groups.

The impact of traumatic experiences are so significant that they can hinder the brain's normal development. This causes behavioral, emotional, academic, and other developmental changes that a person who has not experienced a traumatic event is far less likely to have. Seemingly simple things— a facial expression, one's proximity, or tone of voice—may trigger memories of a painful event. This can lead to various reactions, including aggression, isolation, perfectionism and more.

While research shows that trauma affects one in four children, evidence suggests that with supportive educators and a healing-centered school community, students can learn, achieve and begin to heal.

## The Physiological Impact of Trauma: Trauma and the Brain

Trauma can affect how our brains react to outside influences. This can affect learning, behavior and social-emotional development. The degree to which trauma affects the brain is also related to the timing, severity, and ongoing duration of exposure. Trauma may affect brain chemistry as well as structure. Research shows that the effects of trauma are most prominent in the amygdala, hippocampus, and prefrontal cortex.

### **Changes in the amygdala**

The **amygdala** is the area in your brain that manages emotional perception and response. People who have experienced trauma are more likely to react to triggers, especially emotional ones. This can manifest into short tempers and/or heightened flight, fight, freeze or fawn\* responses.

### **Changes in the hippocampus**

The function of the **hippocampus** is associated with memory and learning. People who have experienced trauma have decreased function in this part of their brains. They may also experience structural changes to the hippocampus. Depending on the extent of the trauma, this part of the brain can be significantly smaller in

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people who have experienced trauma thus, impacting a child's ability to be attentive, learn, and remember.

### **Changes in the prefrontal cortex**

The brain's **prefrontal cortex** is responsible for higher-level thinking and reasoning. Because traumatized children often see the world through a lens of fear and uncertainty, they are on constant alert for danger. When a student experiences a trauma trigger, or if they are living with chronic exposure to traumatic events, their brain is in "survival mode." Their energy and focus is on safety. This focus on safety and avoiding danger prevents students from fully getting into "learning mode" and engaging their prefrontal cortex. Over time, students who experience trauma may develop a decreased ability to think critically because of the increased focus on being safe. The good news is that our brains are neuroplastic, which means that we can continue to develop new neural pathways throughout our lives. With support and guidance, traumatized students can learn, and thrive.

\*Research is still ongoing in this area.

### Trauma and Academic Performance

Because of the effects trauma has on the brain and on mental health, students who have experienced trauma often struggle academically. This may manifest in difficulty with the:

- language development and communication skills
- establishment of a coherent sense of self
- ability to attend to classroom tasks and instructions
- ability to organize and remember new information
- ability to understand cause-and-effect relationships

Fortunately, studies show that with supportive educators and a trauma-informed and a healing-centered approach to learning, students who have experienced trauma can learn.

### Impacts of Trauma

Trauma can have a significant impact on a child's psychological well-being and cognitive ability. Most notably:

**Cognitive delays.** Children and adolescents who have experienced chronic traumatic events early in life may experience a delay in their normal brain development process. Examples of this include difficulty concentrating or paying attention, cognitive delays, difficulty with predicting and making inferences, and challenges with executive function— especially planning and problem solving.

**Psychological impacts.** The psychological impact of trauma can include depression, anxiety, behavioral dysregulation, and post-traumatic symptoms like intrusive thoughts and hyper-arousal, among others.

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**Difficulty Processing Relationships & Emotions.** Students may have difficulty forming or maintaining relationships, reading social cues, and trusting others.

**Difficulty Making Predictions & Inferences.** Traumatized children often have difficulty connecting cause and effect. Because of this, they may not understand that they can influence what happens to them.

**Wariness of the Future.** When children live in environments where they can't make connections between their actions and the responses they trigger, the future can feel unpredictable and out of their control. This may lead some children to become extremely passive. This can look like a student "checking out" because they believe they have a low impact on the world.

### Signs of Trauma

Depending on the student's age, they may exhibit these signs of distress that result from trauma:

Preschool Students	Elementary School Students	Middle and High School Students
Bedwetting Thumbsucking Acting younger than their age Difficulty separating from their parents Temper tantrums Aggressive behavior like hitting, kicking, throwing things, or biting Not playing with others kids their age Repetitive playing out of events related to trauma exposure	Changes in their behavior such as aggression, anger, irritability, withdrawal from others, and sadness Difficulty adjusting to a new school Difficulty building friendships or getting along with peers Fear of separation from parents Fear of something bad happening	A sense of responsibility or guilt for the bad things that have happened Feelings of shame or embarrassment Feelings of helplessness Changes in how they think about the world Loss of faith Problems in relationships, including peers, family, and teachers Conduct problems

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## Childhood Trauma and School/Classroom Behavior

Many of the effects of traumatic experiences on school and classroom behavior can make it difficult for the student to process social cues and to convey feelings in an appropriate manner. Students may also develop behavioral coping mechanisms to feel safe and in control. When triggered, a student who has experienced trauma can externalize emotions (act out, fight, leave the classroom) or internalize emotions (disengage, become overly compliant, or depressed).

## Trauma and Self-Regulation

Trauma can interfere with a child's ability to self-regulate and manage their emotions, thoughts and behaviors in ways that are considered socially acceptable. One reason is due to the effect of trauma on brain chemistry and structure. For example, when the brain is in "survival mode," the ability to self-regulate intense emotions is disrupted. In "survival mode" a child is focused on safety. Another reason is related to cognition and learning. Students who have been in situations that are beyond their control may have developed negative thinking patterns. They may perceive situations as more negative and perceive their ability to control or influence their environment as very limited. Their experiences may have taught them that reacting with anger and aggression or numbing and withdrawal is a way to stay safe. Both of these reasons impact a student's ability to self-regulate and manage their emotions and behaviors.

## Trauma-Sensitive Tiered Intervention Strategies

Trauma can affect students differently. While some may need minimal support to begin the path to healing and academic success, others may need more targeted or personalized interventions and support.

As educators, we can make some strategic changes in our learning environments and instruction to help students develop social-emotional skills and experience academic success. When working with students who may have experienced trauma, it helps to identify resources that can be implemented in the classroom, school and community setting. This will not only support the child, but also support that child's family. To get started we suggest using your school's MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Support) team to create a research-based intervention plan for your students.

"A Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) is a data-driven, problem-solving framework to improve outcomes for all students. MTSS relies on a continuum of evidence-based practices matched to student needs. Positive Behavior Intervention & Supports (PBIS) is an example of MTSS centered on social behavior." (<https://www.pbis.org/pbis/tiered-framework>)

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### **Tier I**

Tier I interventions are considered universal supports for all students. Examples of this are:

- Mindfulness practices (yoga, breathing, meditation)
- Intentional conversations (check-ins, guided discussions, etc.)
- Restorative practices
- Using consistent and predictable routines
- Creating opportunities to build confidence and leadership skills
- School-wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS)
- Creation of safe physical spaces

### **Tier II**

Tier II supports are typically used with individual or small groups of students who may have low to moderate challenges with success in the classroom or school.

Examples of this are:

- Targeted SEL Instruction
- Access to self-regulation aids (classroom calm corner, opportunities for movement breaks, fidgets, visit to counselor)
- Increased supervision
- Positive Reinforcements
- Small group instruction for academic support
- Small group interventions with school social workers or school psychologists

### **Tier III**

Tier III supports focus on individual student needs and may be necessary for students who present moderate to severe concerns to the educator. You should not try to develop Tier III solutions without the support of others. It is important that your work includes a multi-disciplinary team: an administrator, behavior specialist and other staff members who work with this student. Tier III supports should not be put in place unless Tier I and Tier II interventions have been tried and had limited or no success. Key elements of this level of support are:

- **Functional Behavior Assessments:** This is a formal process that digs deeply into the possible root causes for specific problems. After this assessment is complete, it may lead to creating a Functional Behavior Plan for this student.
- **Wraparound Supports:** These are holistic student-centered and family-centered supports that may be put in place. Students and families typically work with a facilitator who can provide wraparound supports and who can develop goals, systems and strategies to help the student be successful in an academic setting.

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- **Cultural and Contextual Fit:** When developing any type of interventions for students, both the school's and the student's culture and context must be considered.

As educators, it is our responsibility to understand how school systems can positively or negatively influence and impact students who have experienced trauma and can lead to further feelings of stress, anxiety and disengagement. For example, harsh and discriminatory discipline practices, inclusive curriculum, culturally responsive teaching practices, and high or low expectations from teachers, adults and other authority figures can add to or minimize harm to students already experiencing trauma.

### Managing Your Own Trauma

As educators, we can become overwhelmed with the issues and problems that our students might bring to school. That is why it is important for you to take care of yourself and avoid compassion fatigue, burn out and/or secondary trauma. You should practice self-care strategies and know when and how to seek support from family, friends, and or professionals. In some cases, it may also be helpful to assess your own history of trauma and consider how it may be triggered while trying to take care of others. If this happens, please see the resources below for additional support. Also, remember this familiar airplane adage: *In case of an emergency, put your oxygen mask on first before helping others put on theirs.* These are some suggestions for self care:

Addressing Triggers in the Moment	Long-Term Care
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Breathing exercises</li> <li>● Yoga</li> <li>● Mindfulness activities</li> <li>● Journaling</li> <li>● Taking time away</li> <li>● Taking media breaks</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Cultivate and maintain healthy relationships</li> <li>● Attend workshops on social emotional skills</li> <li>● Journaling</li> <li>● Therapy</li> <li>● Developing a regular mindfulness/meditation practice</li> </ul>

## Supporting Rationale and Research

Ko, Susan. "Culture and Trauma Brief: Promoting Culturally Competent Trauma-Informed Practices." *The National Child Traumatic Stress Network*, 2005.

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[www.nctsn.org/resources/culture-and-trauma-brief-promoting-culturally-competent-trauma-informed-practices](http://www.nctsn.org/resources/culture-and-trauma-brief-promoting-culturally-competent-trauma-informed-practices).

Peterson, Sarah. "Essential Elements." The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 19 Mar. 2018,

[www.nctsn.org/trauma-informed-care/trauma-informed-systems/schools/essential-elements](http://www.nctsn.org/trauma-informed-care/trauma-informed-systems/schools/essential-elements) .

National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Schools Committee. (2017). Creating, supporting, and sustaining trauma-informed schools: A system framework. Los Angeles, CA, and Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.

"Preventing Childhood Trauma: Guidelines for Administrators and Crisis Teams."

National Association of School Psychologists (NASP),

[www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/mental-health-resources/trauma/preventing-childhood-trauma-guidelines-for-administrators-and-crisis-teams](http://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/mental-health-resources/trauma/preventing-childhood-trauma-guidelines-for-administrators-and-crisis-teams) .

Rossen, Eric, and Katherine Cowan. "Supporting the Principal's Data-Informed Decisions." *Principal's Research Review*, vol. 8, no. 6, Nov. 2013.

## Resources

Resources helpful for completing this micro-credential

[Video on ACES](#)

[Self-assessment](#)

[Student Observation Forms](#)

Building Trauma-Sensitive Schools

[Jpg of Trauma Sensitive School](#)

[Attachment Trauma Network - Childhood Trauma](#)

[NAEYC - Trauma Sensitive Classrooms](#)

[Greater Good - Five Ways to Support Students Affected by Trauma](#)

[School to Prison Pipeline](#)

[NEA EdJustice](#)

[Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\) - Violence Prevention](#)

Small Group Interventions for School Social Workers & Psychologists

[Learner Variability Navigator | Learner Variability Project](#)

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## Individual Interventions

[Intervention Central: Response to Intervention | RTI | RTI Resources](#)

[Education World | Connecting educators to what works](#)

[PBISWorld.com Home Page](#)

## What To Do If You Are Triggered - Helpful Resources

[Managing Your Triggers Toolkit](#)

[Five Steps for Managing Your Emotional Triggers](#)

[Four Steps to Dealing with Negative Triggers](#)

[Emotional Triggers and What to Do About Them](#)

# Submission Guidelines & Evaluation Criteria

*To earn the micro-credential, you must receive a passing score in Parts 1 and 3, and be proficient for all components in Part 2.*

## Part 1. Overview Questions (Provides Context)

### **(300–500 words)**

*Please use the suggested word count as a guide to answer the following contextual questions. This will help our assessor understand your current context for working on this micro-credential.*

*Please do not include any information that will make you identifiable to your reviewers.*

Watch the video on ACEs and take the self-assessment (both can be found in the resource section of this micro-credential). Please note that you will not be asked to share your results of the assessment. After completing these two actions, answer the following questions and submit your responses.

1. Describe your current role in education, your students' demographics, and school climate. How do you think your own childhood or experiences may shape the way you view, approach and interact with the students, staff, and other stakeholders in your school?
2. Describe some of the challenging behaviors of the students you work with in terms of academic performance, classroom behaviors, and social interactions.

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3. Describe your reason for taking this micro-credential. Discuss what you hope to learn and do, including how you plan to share your experience with others in the school community.

**Passing:** Response provides reasonable and accurate information that justifies the reason for choosing this micro-credential to address specific needs of both the teacher and the student. A learning goal that describes what they hope to gain from earning this micro-credential needs to be clearly stated.

## Part 2. Work Examples/Artifacts/Evidence

To earn this micro-credential, please submit the following **five** artifacts as evidence of your learning.

\*Please do not include any information that will make you or your students identifiable to your reviewers.

### **Artifact 1: Student Selection (300–500 words)**

Identify an individual student or small group of no more than four students that regularly display challenges in academic performance, engagement or behavior. Submit a detailed description of how and why you identified the student(s). For each student chosen, include:

- Any relevant demographic information
- Specific challenges that need to be addressed
- Describe how this student forms and maintains relationships with you, other adults and or other students.
- What you think are the root cause(s) of the challenges

### **Artifact 2: Student Observation (100–300 words)**

For the student(s) identified in Artifact 1, observe the student (s) and collect baseline data. If possible, ask your school leadership to provide you with coverage so you can observe the student(s) without distractions. You may also consider observing the student(s) in a classroom or learning environment other than your own. Submit a summary of your observations: Your summary should include:

- Purpose for the observation
- Focus of the observation
- Setting
- Unit of time
- Specific observable behaviors, free of any pre-judgements.

*For example, say, “student got out of their seat five times during the 10-minute read aloud” rather than, “student was not paying attention during the read aloud.”*

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You may use your own form or system or a form provided in the resource section of this micro-credential.

**Artifact 3: List of Interventions  
(200–400 words)**

Use the resources listed on this micro-credential to create a list of 3–5 possible interventions and/or strategies, then describe why they would be appropriate and helpful to improving student(s) performance or behavior.

**Artifact 4: Co-created Plan and Results  
(400–600 words)**

Meet with the individual student or small group. Work together to identify three goals and corresponding interventions. Use this information to create a learning or behavior contract for this student(s) performance and behavior. Your plan should :

- Include the setting and the duration of the meeting
- Any observations about the students during this meeting (engagement, behavior, social emotional skills, etc.)
- List the three goals and the reasoning behind each one
- List the interventions and expected results
- Provide a timeline for implementing the interventions
- Summary of the results of each intervention used
- Artifacts from implementation. You may include weekly behavior chart(s), lesson plans from small individual/small group activities or a copy of another form of data collection.

**Artifact 5: Debrief with Student(s)  
(200–400 words)**

Meet with the individual student or small group to gather input on the intervention plan. Ask the student or the group these questions:

- What went well for you?
- What was/is still hard for you?
- How did you do with the goals?
- Were these the right goals? Why or why not?
- Do we need new goals?
- Did the interventions help you? Why or why not?
- What changes should we make moving forward?
- How can we work together to meet our goals?
- What else do you want me to know?

Modify this as needed and based on the age and/or academic level of your student(s). You may have the student write down their answers before or after you meet, or you may transcribe their responses during the meeting. Submit either the transcription or the student(s) written responses.

## Part 2. Rubric

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	<b>Proficient</b>	<b>Basic</b>	<b>Developing</b>
<b>Artifact 1: Student Selection</b>	<p>Includes all of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Relevant demographic information</li> <li>-Specific challenges that need to be addressed</li> <li>-Description of how this student forms and maintains relationships with you, other adults, and/or other students</li> <li>-Determination of the root cause(s) of the challenges</li> </ul>	<p>Includes some of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Relevant demographic information</li> <li>-Specific challenges that need to be addressed</li> <li>-Description of how this student forms and maintains relationships with you, other adults, and/or other students.</li> <li>-Determination of the root cause(s) of the challenges</li> </ul>	<p>Most of the following are missing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Relevant demographic information</li> <li>-Specific challenges that need to be addressed</li> <li>-Description of how this student forms and maintains relationships with you, other adults, and/or other students</li> <li>-Determination of the root cause(s) of the challenges</li> </ul>
<b>Artifact 2: Student Observation</b>	<p>Includes all of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Purpose for the observation</li> <li>-Observational focus setting</li> <li>-Specific observable behaviors without pre-judgements</li> </ul>	<p>Includes some of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Purpose for the observation</li> <li>-Observational focus setting</li> <li>-Specific observable behaviors without pre-judgements</li> </ul>	<p>Most of the following are missing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Purpose for the observation</li> <li>-Observational focus setting</li> <li>-Specific observable behaviors without pre-judgements</li> </ul>
<b>Artifact 3: List of Interventions</b>	<p>Includes all of the following:</p>	<p>Is missing one of the following:</p>	<p>Did not list appropriate strategies/ interventions</p>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-at least three possible interventions and/or strategies,</li> <li>-Description of why they would be appropriate and helpful to improve students' performance or behavior</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-less than three possible interventions and/or strategies,</li> <li>-Description of why they would be appropriate and helpful to improve students' performance or behavior</li> </ul>	
<b>Artifact 4: Co-created Plan and Results</b>	<p>Plan and results include all of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Setting and the duration of meeting</li> <li>-Observations about the students during this meeting (engagement, behavior, social emotional skills, etc. )</li> <li>-Three goals and the reasoning behind each one</li> <li>-Interventions and expected results</li> <li>-A timeline for implementing the interventions</li> <li>-Summary of the results of each intervention used</li> <li>-Artifacts from implementation</li> </ul>	<p>Plan and results include some of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Setting and the duration of meeting</li> <li>-Observations about the students during this meeting (engagement, behavior, social emotional skills, etc.)</li> <li>-Three goals and the reasoning behind each one</li> <li>-Interventions and expected results</li> <li>-A timeline for implementing the interventions</li> <li>-Summary of the results of each intervention used</li> <li>-Artifacts from implementation</li> </ul>	<p>Plan and results are missing most of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Setting and the duration of meeting</li> <li>-Observations about the students during this meeting (engagement, behavior, social emotional skills, etc.)</li> <li>-Three goals and the reasoning behind each one</li> <li>-Interventions and expected results</li> <li>-A timeline for implementing the interventions</li> <li>-Summary of the results of each intervention used</li> <li>-Artifacts from implementation</li> </ul>

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<b>Artifact 5: Debrief with Student(s)</b>	Submitted student responses or a transcript of their responses to the questions Note: Modifications were made only as needed to address grade or academic level or the student(s)  Student responses show authentic engagement in the process	Submitted student responses or a transcript of their response to the questions Note: Modification made were not appropriate for grade or academic level or the student(s)  Or Note: Modifications were not made but they should have been to address grade or academic level of the student(s)  Student responses gave little evidence of engagement in the process	Student responses to questions and/ or transcription lacked details and evidence that students were engaged in the process
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### Part 3 Reflection

**(300–500 words)**

Use the word count as a guide to write a personal reflection about your work on this micro-credential. For tips on writing a good reflection, review the following resource:

[How Do I Write a Good Personal Reflection?](#)

*Please do not include any information that will make you identifiable to your reviewers.*

1. Describe your experience in terms of thoughts, feelings, and actions throughout the process of identifying students, creating an action plan, and implementing and evaluating your selected interventions.
2. How was your experience with intentionally being trauma sensitive while working to help your student(s) improve performance or behavior?
3. What impact did collaborating have on identifying goals, creating plans, and evaluating performance; what impact did it have on the relationship between you and the identified student(s)?

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4. What will you keep, modify, or do differently as an intervention strategy to work with future students from a trauma-sensitive perspective?

**Passing:** Reflection provides evidence that this activity has had a positive impact on both educator practice and student success. Specific examples are cited from personal or work-related experiences to support claims. Also included are specific actionable steps that demonstrate how new learning will be integrated into future practices.