PREVENTING ACES AND SUPPORTING CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING THROUGH AN ECOSYSTEMIC APPROACH

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Thriving and Well-being Across Ecosystems

Individuals thrive or languish across dynamically interdependent individual and collective ecosystems.

- Thriving and well-being are:
  - Individual and collective
  - Subjective and physical

- Involves and occurs:
  - Across all life domains
  - In all parts of children's and adult's life spaces

- Experiences, relationships, and environments shape how children and adults develop

- Interrelated social, emotional, and cognitive capacities affect how children and adults interact and respond to circumstances
  - These capacities are affected by the conditions that support or undermine social emotional competence

- Relationships, meaning making, stress drive growth and development

- The historical context matters: covid and current social conflicts provide examples
Success Linked to Competencies and Conditions

A young person’s success in any life arena is linked to learning, equity, & their capacity to thrive.
ACES are not Destiny

• The implications of neuroplasticity and the human capacity to learn
  – The brain can heal and grow
  – People can learn and change

• Resilience, personal growth, and thriving are possible
  – When we create contexts that buffer adversity and support resilience and healthy development
    » Safe and supportive environments (schools and communities) - e.g., conditions for learning
    » Adaptable, caring, and supportive relationship with adults and peers
    » Ecological assets
  – When we support connectedness, groundedness and the development of social, emotional, and cognitive competencies
    » A sense of individual and collective efficacy
    » The ability to self-regulate and to develop relationships
    » Affirming faith or cultural traditions or other senses of groundedness
The Proximal Sources of Adversity & Trauma
Conditions that Perpetuate Adversity and Trauma

• Trauma, toxic stress, multiple and cascading traumas types of trauma, retraumatization, negative learning, and the amplification of illbeing are possible:

  – When we create contexts that undermine development and resilience
    » Threatening and unsupportive environments (schools and communities)
    » Harmful interventions
    » Ecological risks
    » Harsh, punitive, uncaring, caring, and unsupportive interactions with adults and peers

  – Undermining:
    » Ability to understand and respond to social relationships (e.g., Forming affirmative social relationships)
    » Ability to attend to information, accurately assess situations, and make decisions.
    » Senses of hope, connectedness, and efficacy
    » Ability to understand and manage emotions (see next slide)
Excessive Stress and Capacity-Building

Excessive stress affects how well we develop and use executive function skills.

**Early Childhood**
Severe, frequent stress redirects children's brain development away from planning and impulse control toward building the capacity for rapid threat response.

**Adulthood**
Excessive stress overloads adults' ability to use executive function and intentional self-regulation skills, leaving them to rely primarily on automatic responses.

Source: Center on the Developing Child
“Trauma decontextualized in a person looks like personality. Trauma decontextualized in a family looks like family traits. Trauma in people looks like culture.”

– Resmaa Menakem

Source: https://www.safestates.org/page/SRPFSEM
Support As a Key Facilitator of Healing, Growth, and Change

- The importance of adult and peer support
- Adults, peers, and siblings also need support so that they can:
  - Attune
  - Provide emotional support and Buffer stress
  - Be culturally humble, competent, and responsive
  - Support cognitive, social, and emotional development
  - Provide instrumental and emotional support
- Stress, fear, cognitive overload, and a lack of empathy undermine the ability to provide support
Why Should Schools and Service Settings Address Trauma?

• Unaddressed trauma has negative effects on learning and relationship-building and interferes with organizational missions (e.g., Learning).

• Children and youth affected by trauma develop survival strategies that can be misunderstood, mislabeled, and mishandled.

• Policies and protocols can unintentionally traumatize or retraumatize.

• Staff affected by trauma may:
  • Be less able to do their jobs effectively
  • Amplify problems and/or re-traumatize (e.g., through counter aggression)

• Schools can prevent some trauma and mitigate the effects of family and community based traumas negative consequences for children and youth.

• Adopting a trauma-sensitive approach can have positive effects for students, staff, schools, and outcomes.
Trauma-Sensitive and Healing-Centered Approaches

**Trauma-Sensitive Schools**

A schoolwide strategy for addressing trauma in which all aspects of the education environment are grounded in an understanding of trauma and its effects and designed to promote resilience for all.

**Equity-Centered Trauma-Informed Education / Healing Centered Engagement**

Holistic, asset-driven approach that highlights the ways in which trauma and healing are experienced collectively, re-centers culture as a central feature in well-being, and focuses on addressing the systemic, root causes of trauma (Ginwright, 2018).

Equity and social justice are key concerns as educators make changes individually, in classrooms, in schools, and district and statewide (Venet, 2021).
Why Should Schools Address Trauma?

Multi-tiered Approach to Addressing Trauma in Schools

Tier 3
Tertiary interventions
- Individualized
- Specific trauma interventions

Tier 2
Secondary interventions
- For some students exposed/at risk
- Group interventions

Tier 1
Universal interventions
- For all students
- Preventive, proactive

Intensity of need and response

(American Institutes for Research, 2018)
Traditional to Trauma Sensitive Environments

- **Judgmental**: Understands behaviors as the result of individual deficits (What’s wrong with you?). Uses negative labels.

- **Fixing Individuals**: Focus for change is on the individual. Solution is for youth to “fix” their behavior.

- **Power Over/Obedience**: Views adult authority and control as critical to student success.

- **Reactive/Punitive**: Punitive discipline strategies are the primary approach.

- **Siloed**: Support for students exposed to trauma should be left to counseling professionals.

- **Deficit-Oriented Batch Approaches**: Deficit and organizationally driven approaches that ignore intersectionality and the individuality of development and responsiveness to polytrauma.

- **Curious**: Considers whether behaviors may be ways of coping with traumatic experiences. Avoids labels.

- **Environmental**: Takes a more holistic view and considers how external factors influence youth.

- **Power with/Collaboration**: Encourages student and family choice and control.

- **Proactive/Restorative**: Positive, strengths-based approaches to discipline are used most often.

- **Integrated**: Assumes a shared responsibility for addressing trauma.

- **Strength-based, individualized approaches**: Approaches address the strengths and needs of each individual and the implications of intersection malady.
Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Trauma Sensitive Settings

- **Educating** all school staff about trauma and its effects
- **Providing** physically, emotionally, and identity safe environments.
- **Eliminating** potentially retraumatizing practices, such as harsh, punitive, and shaming responses
  - Corporal punishment
  - Restraint & seclusion
  - Suspension
  - Disproportionate surveillance, and harshness of responses
  - Implicit and explicit bias
  - Racial and cultural "neutrality"
  - School hardening policies
Safety is More Than Physical Security

• Physical Safety
• Emotional Safety
• Psychological Safety
• Identity Safety
• Fair and Equitable Treatment
• Minimization of Toxic Conditions

Image source: https://cdn.pixabay.com/photo/2020/11/05/19/29/woman-5716038_960_720.jpg
Characteristics of Culturally Responsive Trauma Sensitive Settings

• **Ensuring** that the setting is experienced (e.g., expressed culture and practices) are culturally affirming

• **Providing** trauma sensitive assessments and services that are linguistically and culturally competent and responsive

• **Building** individual and collective social and emotional skills and ecological assets to cope with, address, and prevent adversity

• **Promoting and embodying** youth and family voice, choice, and empowerment

• **Aligning** all policies and procedures with a universal, trauma-sensitive approach that supports well-being and thriving
Transformative Approaches to Trauma Sensitive and Informed Interventions

**Trauma-Sensitive Schools (TSS)**
- Understanding of trauma and its effects on students and adults
- Integration of practices to foster healing
- Addresses adult trauma and well-being
- Reduction of harmful practices, procedures, and policies
- Lens to inform other practices and approaches (e.g., instruction, behavior management, discipline, student and family engagement, SEL)

**Transformative TSS**
- Equity & healing focused
- Builds individual and collective agency and resilience
- Supports systems change to transform structures of injustice and to promote robust equity
- Positive and culturally affirming school climate, conditions for learning, and restorative practices
More Oxytocin, Less Cortisol
Resources

- **Building a Multi-System Trauma-Informed Collaborative.** A guide for cross-sector adoption of a trauma-informed approach.
- **Trauma-Sensitive Schools Training Package.** A toolkit with resources for assisting schools in adopting a universal, trauma-sensitive approach.
- **Trauma-Informed Organizational Capacity Scale.** An instrument for measuring capacity in trauma-informed care for health and social service systems.
- **Trauma-sensitive Schools and Social Emotional Learning: An Integration.** A brief that examines how trauma-sensitive schools and social and emotional learning can be integrated and expanded to foster equity and transformative learning.
- **An Evidence-Based Road Map for School and Community Safety.** A blog that addresses school safety and provides links to evidence on the risk of school hardening.
- **Creating Safe, Equitable, Engaging Schools A Comprehensive, Evidence-Based Approach to Supporting Students.** Resources for creating culturally responsive, trauma sensitive schools.
- **https://www.shankerinstitute.org/blog/what-weve-learned-about-creating-safe-equitable-and-engaging-schools.** A blog on the importance of support for adults as well as students at this time.
Resources

• National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments. A federal TA center that provides many resources to implement trauma sensitive, culturally responsive, safe schools.
• [https://youth.gov/](https://youth.gov/). The website of the Interagency Working Group On Youth provides links to critical federal resources relevant to trauma.
• Science of Learning and Development (SoLD) Alliance ([soldalliance.org](http://soldalliance.org)). Website providing resources on the science of learning and development.
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