

# Trauma- developing a whole school approach



Amy Sayer FCCT @AmySayerAS



1

## Why do we need to talk about trauma now?



- The COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of lockdown periods has meant that a greater number of children have been exposed to potentially traumatic events such as domestic violence, death of loved ones, and poverty caused by pandemic-related redundancies.
- There is also a need to recognise and support staff in school who maybe struggling with secondary trauma as a result of supporting families so extensively.

2



## What is trauma? Source: Mind website

Trauma can include events where you feel:

- frightened
- under threat
- humiliated
- rejected
- abandoned
- invalidated
- unsafe
- unsupported
- trapped
- ashamed
- powerless.

3

## How does trauma impact children in our schools?

“Long after a traumatic event is over, it may be reactivated at the slightest hint of danger and mobilize disturbed brain circuits and secrete massive amounts of stress hormones.”  
(Van der Kolk, 2014)

4

## How to spot trauma-based signs in children

It can affect children physically through a range of signs which you might observe in your classroom.

- They might regularly present with stomach issues/pains, headaches, chest pains, a racing heart or insomnia.
- These are all potentially caused by their sensitive stress response which has been reactivated in the present due to something which has caused an emotional or physical 'flashback' to their past trauma.
- This could be a certain smell, noise, phrase or experience which was related to their original trauma. Even if more than one child in your class experienced the same trauma, the 'triggers' may present differently.

5

## How to spot trauma-based behaviours in the classroom



- They might be withdrawn and believe that there is 'something wrong with them'.
- They might find it overwhelming to work in groups with new students and no guidance about the specific roles within in.
- They might find it hard to communicate with new adults in their lives such as teaching assistants or supply teachers.
- They might find it hard to cope during 'non-teaching' parts of the day such as before school, break and lunch times.

6

## How to spot trauma-based behaviours in the classroom

• They might struggle to cope with sudden changes in seating-plans, teachers, resources etc.



• They might not be able to concentrate for long periods of time on tasks due to hypervigilance

• They might withdraw in lessons and not be able to read out loud or answer questions in front of others.

• They might struggle with sensory hypersensitivity caused by the classroom they are in. This would show as noticing sounds, smells or changes in lighting in a way that other students might not.

7

## An emotional regulation 'toolkit'

Due to the huge range of potential trauma 'triggers' which could happen in school, it is important all students have a choice to self-select the most soothing and regulating for them.

This could be:

- A fidget toy
- A mindful drink of water
- Walking to the end of the corridor and back
- Colouring/doodling
- Talking to a trusted adult/friend about their feelings
- Reading
- Noticing/counting techniques
- Organising/sorting
- Listening to familiar/reassuring music
- Playing a game on their phone
- Breathing techniques- CAUTION!

8

## How can schools provide a trauma-informed approach?

- Have a whole-school mental health approach which includes all members of your school community.
- Ensure training is given to staff about the impact of trauma.
- Create a psychologically safe environment for staff and students.
- Give students an emotional toolkit they can choose from to regulate when they are 'triggered' by overwhelming feelings.

9

## Have a whole-school mental health approach which includes all members of your school community.

- Staff need to feel supported with their mental health and there is an explicit policy which is used for this consistently.
- Students understand that there is an explicit pastoral support system in their school and know how to access this.
- Parents understand how they can access support for their child's mental health in school/ external services.

10

## Ensure that training is given to staff about trauma

This training must be for all staff and governors who work in the school.

It must include:

- the signs and behaviours to spot in students who may be struggling due to trauma.
- how to talk to students about their mental health using active listening and empathy.
- the referral systems to use if they suspect a child is struggling with the impact of trauma.
- showing staff the range of coping strategies that the students can use.

11

## Create a psychologically safe environment for staff and students.

- Have a clear and consistent behaviour policy which is used in every classroom.
- Consistent seating plans which take into account the child's needs.
- Each child has a safe and trusted adult who they can go to for support when needed.
- Opportunities for all students to feel successful to boost their self-esteem.
- Pastoral areas of the school are known 'safe' places for children to regulate when needed.
- A range of opportunities for extra-curricular clubs for students to build safe peer relationships and reduce feeling of isolation.

12

Give students an emotional toolkit they can choose from to regulate when they are 'triggered' by overwhelming feelings.

- All students are taught coping strategies for processing feelings as part of their PSHE curriculum.
- Information about students who have experienced trauma is accessible on a secure centralised system.
- Students have 'check-in' passes to have time with their 'safe adult' when appropriate.
- An understanding that being outside a classroom to regulate is not a punishment, but a choice that is available to them when needed.

13

Example of a useful resource...

Create a credit-card style card with the following information on for the child to carry to remind themselves and others what works for them.

When I am feeling...(insert specifically tricky feeling here)

I will need to choose from the following to help myself...

(list three tried-and-tested strategies)

If these aren't working today, I can go to...(their safe space) to speak to...(their safe adult/s)

N.B. There has to be an understanding from staff about how these can be used by students.

14

## Further reading/resources

- Creating Trauma-Informed Strengths-Based Classrooms

Tom Brunzell and Jacolyn Norrish

- The body keeps the score- Bessel Van Der Kolk

• What happened to you? Dr Bruce Perry and Oprah Winfrey

- My blog on trauma

<https://www.acamh.org/blog/how-to-spot-and-support-students-who-have-experienced-trauma/>

- My whole school training workshops on trauma

<https://amysayerwrites.wordpress.com/>

