



From Adversity to Achievement: Trauma-Informed Tools for Student Success

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AGENDA

1. WELCOME!
2. HOUSEKEEPING
3. DEFINING TRAUMA
4. THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA
5. TRAUMA INFORMED PRACTICES
6. THANK YOU!



WHAT IS TRAUMA?





DEFINING TRAUMA





DEFINING TRAUMA

Trauma: any experience that causes intense physical or psychological stress reaction. Can include isolated instances or repeated stressful situations.

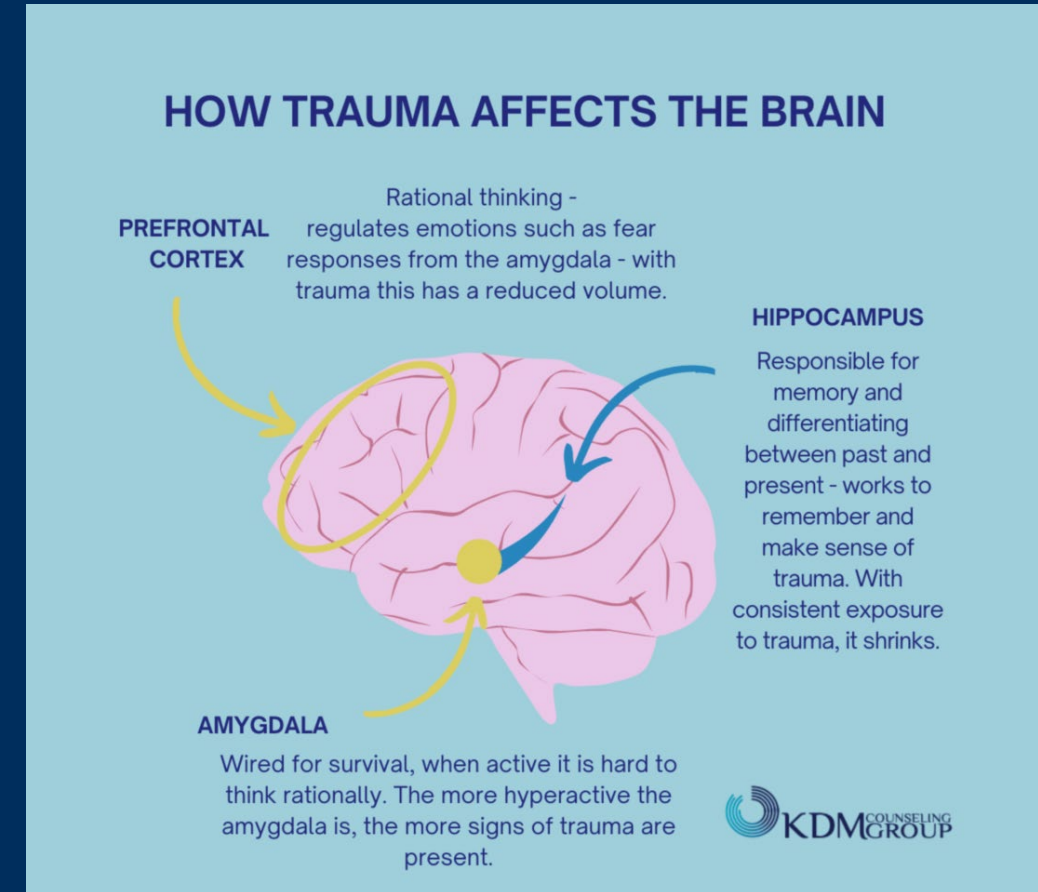
Estimates vary, but many kids experience some type of trauma during their schooling years^{1,2}

¹Cavanaugh, B. (2016). Trauma-informed classrooms and schools. *Beyond Behavior*, 25(2), 41–46.

²Carlson, J. S., Yohannan, J., Darr, C. L., Turley, M. R., Larez, N. A., & Perfect, M. M. (2020). Prevalence of adverse childhood experiences in school-aged youth: A systematic review (1990–2015). *International Journal of School & Educational Psychology*, 8(sup1), 2-23.

THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA ON THE BRAIN

- When we experience stress, our fight-or-flight response is triggered, leading to an initial release of adrenaline that increases heartbeat, breathing, and alertness.
- If the brain continues to sense danger, it releases cortisol to maintain alertness until the threat passes.
- In traumatic events, excess cortisol is released, causing changes in the brain's limbic system and prefrontal cortex, which include structures critical for learning.¹



KDM Counseling Group. "Trauma's Impact on the Brain." KDM Counseling Group. Accessed March 17, 2025. <https://kdmcounselinggroup.com/traumas-impact-on-the-brain>

¹Bremner, J. Douglas. "Traumatic stress: effects on the brain." Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience, vol. 8, 2006, pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3181836.

THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA on EMOTIONAL PROCESSING



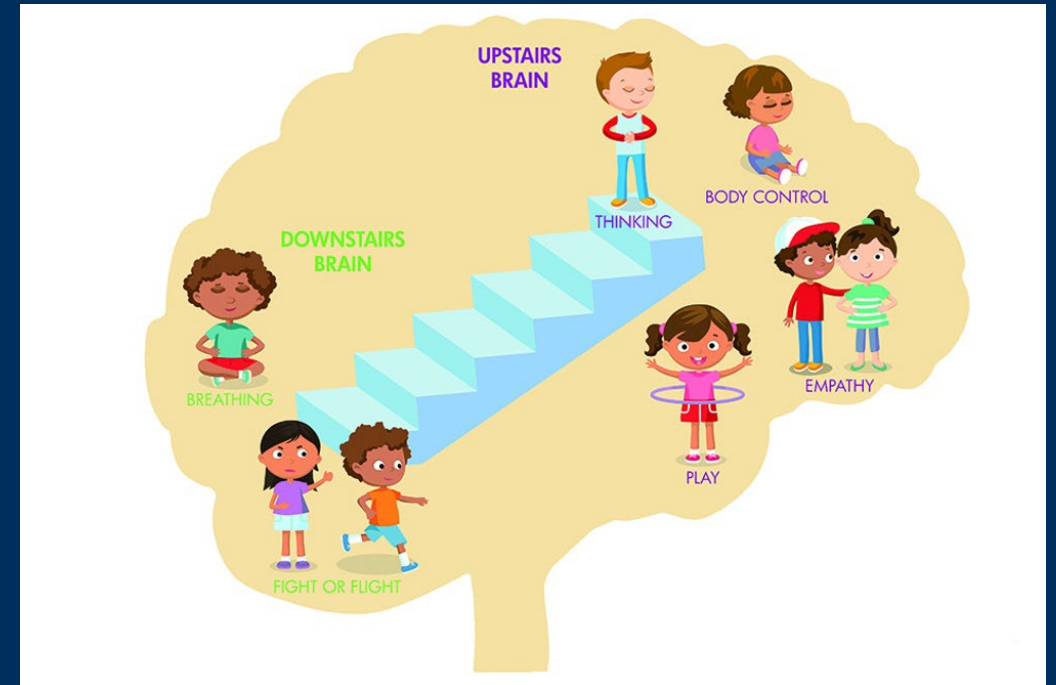
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- The **amygdala** is the part of our limbic system involved in our detection of danger and our emotional reactions.
- You can think of this as **our brain's smoke detector**:
 - When there is danger, our alarms should go off.
 - But those living with trauma may end up with their alarms going off too often.
- For example, those who have experienced trauma have more difficulty differentiating neutral and angry faces¹.

¹<https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1186/s12916-024-03610-w.pdf>

THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA on EMOTIONAL PROCESSING

- **Downstairs Brain:**
 - Functions: Breathing, staying awake, moving eyes, emotions, innate responses such as fight-or-flight response.
 - Structures: Limbic system and below including the amygdala.
 - Impact of trauma: Hyperactive amygdala.
- **Upstairs Brain:**
 - Executive function including decision-making and planning. Emotional regulation. Awareness of self and others.
 - Structures: Cerebrum including the prefrontal cortex.
 - Impact of trauma: reduced volume of prefrontal cortex.



Unknown Author. (n.d.). Response: Fast and instinctive [Image]. Retrieved March 18, 2025, from [https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/content/features/neuroscience-understand-the-upstairs-and-downstairs-brain[1]](https://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/content/features/neuroscience-understand-the-upstairs-and-downstairs-brain%5B1])

THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA ON LEARNING



- The **prefrontal cortex** is an important area underlying executive functions such as planning, decision-making, and sustained attention.
- The **hippocampus** is an important structure in the limbic system that underlies memory.
- For those who experience trauma, **both of these can be affected**, resulting in disrupted learning including lower school performance.^{1,2}

¹<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/>

²Carrion, V. G., & Wong, S. S. (2012). Can traumatic stress alter the brain? Understanding the implications of early trauma on brain development and learning. *Journal of adolescent health*, 51(2), S23-S28.

Children who have experienced trauma...

Could manifest symptoms including¹:

- Physical symptoms, such as *stomach pains* or *reduced appetite*
- Nightmares and/or *changes to sleep*
- Changes in behavior, like *aggressive behaviors, self-harm, and substance use*
- Affective changes, such as *increased irritability and anxiety*
- *Difficulty concentrating and academic challenges*

But **trauma** is very
often invisible to
others.

¹National Child Traumatic Stress Network. (n.d.). About child trauma. Retrieved March 18, 2025, from [<https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/about-child-trauma>]



SECONDARY TRAUMA

Those who witness or learn about trauma can also experience secondary trauma.¹

- Frequent exposure to other people's traumas can lead to secondary trauma such as listening to heart-wrenching or disturbing stories, seeing others in distress, or witnessing an injury.
- The chronic stress of taking in others' trauma can lead to symptoms such as emotional exhaustion or hypervigilance.

¹<https://psychcentral.com/health/secondary-trauma#how-to-help>

TRAUMA-BASED PRACTICES



What are Trauma-Informed Practices?



A set of strategies that can help you create a positive climate for learning, develop trusting relationships with students, and help them develop coping skills.

Valuable for ALL your students.

Creating a Trauma-Informed Classroom

1

Building positive
relationships

2

Creating predictable
routines and safe
spaces

3

Teaching and
modeling
appropriate coping
strategies

Building Positive Relationships



Building Positive Relationships

- This means both positive teacher-student relationships as well as positive student to student relationships
- These positive relationships can help improve students' feelings of psychological safety
- Positive relationships in school can lead to increased engagement and positive attitudes toward school



Building a Classroom that Supports Positive Relationships

- Establish norms for student behavior in your classroom at the beginning of the year or term
 - These norms should be co-developed with students
- Model the behavior you would like to see in your classroom



Build time in your schedule to allow kids to talk about non-academic or school-related things

Age	Circle time/class discussion time ideas
Preschool / Elementary	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Show and tell• Question of the day• Shared story telling
Late Elementary / Middle School	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Play games such as “Would you rather?” or “Two Truths and a Lie”• Incorporate humor – such as a “Friday Funny” where students can share their favorite (school appropriate) memes/comics/TikTok videos• Provide opportunities for small groups and/or pairs of students to work together on fun projects
High School	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Set aside time to discuss current events• Provide space for students to share their interests, such as choosing the music during work time or picking topics for discussion• Play games such as “Unpopular opinion” as a class or in small groups

Give Students the Opportunity to Share and Pursue Their Interests

- Provide choice in assignments/let students explore topics of interest
- Encourage students to look for connections between what you are learning and their background/what they enjoy



Creating Predictable Routines and Safe Spaces



Creating Predictable Routines

Develop and stick with schedules and routines:

- Display class schedules with visualizations for younger students

Let students know if something out of the ordinary will occur ahead of time.

Have consistent expectations for students and ensure they know those expectations.

Consider Your Space

- Consider your physical environment
 - Lighting/visuals
 - Sounds or distractions
- Cozy/calm-down/peace corner
 - Provide a space where students can voluntarily go to help them self-regulate
 - It should not be a punishment or a reward
- Allow for sensory breaks



Make it safe for students to exercise agency and experience failure

- Allow students to have choices and input in schoolwork when possible.
- Teach and model the importance of making mistakes and growth mindset and allow students to revise or re-do work if they want to improve their score.
- Allow students different ways to demonstrate their learning.



Teaching and Modeling Appropriate Coping Strategies



Identifying Strong Emotional Reactions/Triggers

- It can be difficult, even as an adult, to recognize when you are being triggered by something in the environment
- Teaching students (when they are calm) to recognize signs that they may be leaving their upstairs brain can be helpful
 - Ask students to think about what happens in your body when you are starting to get angry/sad/scared
 - Racing heart
 - Breathing faster
 - Shaking/feeling like you want to hide
 - Feeling shut down/fatigued
- Create a game plan for what students can do when they feel triggered

Coping Strategies: Building Regulation

- Recognizing and naming emotions
- Mindfulness can help you learn to regulate your emotions and thoughts
 - Mindfulness practices can be done regularly to help build skills
- Create a “safe space” in your mind that you can revisit when you need calm
- Exploring your emotional reactions (after you are calm!) can help you identify ways that you may be engaging in unhelpful thinking patterns. Try reframing your thinking





Coping Strategies: *What to do When You are Feeling Triggered*

- **Grounding** – what can you see, hear, and touch? Remind yourself you are safe
- **Deep Breathing** – slow, deep breaths
- **Movement** – take a walk or exercise
- **Taking a Break** – learning to articulate when you need a time out to be alone

Modeling Coping Strategies

- Provide an environment where it is safe to have feelings
 - When appropriate, you could name your feelings and what you are doing to help yourself regulate
- Regularly practice strategies that can help you manage your thoughts and feelings as a class



Building a Trauma-Sensitive School



Build School Community

- Involve and partner with families
 - Help families feel welcome.
 - Encourage and provide open communication.
 - What resources do families in the community need that the school can provide?
 - What resources can families provide to the school?
 - Provide opportunities for students to participate in extra-curriculars in different ways and create their own clubs and activities.

Supporting Teachers / Staff

- Make it safe for teachers to exercise agency and experience failure.
- Provide opportunities for staff to get support from colleagues and/or administration.
- Gather input from staff on ways that administration can help manage stress and job difficulties.
- Recognize and help address secondary trauma.



Trauma-Sensitive Behavior Management/Discipline

- Co-regulation
 - Many students need help getting back to a regulated state (into their “upstairs brain”) after they are triggered.
- Acknowledging the validity of students’ feelings without endorsing the behavior.
- Providing appropriate consequences for misbehavior / repairing relationships.
- Discuss what could have been done differently when students are calm.
- “Zero-tolerance” policies do not consider reasons for behavior and are not considered trauma-sensitive.

Q and A

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*Thank
you!*

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