

# No More Scared Straight! Creating Trauma-Sensitive Environments for At-Risk-Children in School Settings

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the current climate of schools in America and the need for schools to have a Trauma Sensitive School Environment (TSSE). It looks at the rates of children who have been exposed to overwhelming experiences, such as witnessing violence between their caretakers, being the direct targets of abuse, and other kinds of adversity. This paper utilizes case studies from teachers who have taught at the public school level and what they have observed and seen when educating children. This paper also reviews findings from the Adverse Childhood Experiences study (ACEs) and propose what can be done to create more trauma-sensitive school environments from k-12. Outlining opportunities to increase and expand these efforts, this paper will provide recommendations for schools to be trauma sensitive.

**Key words:** trauma sensitive, school environment, academic success and achievement

## 1. Introduction

This paper looks at how to increase Trauma Sensitive School Environments (TSSE) in schools. It explores how trauma directly impacts a child/students' academic performance. Teachers in a k-12 grade education setting from three different schools in Los Angeles County (i.e., a nonpublic therapeutic school; a private school and a public school) were used for this purpose. The observations of these three educational academic settings (EASs) were examined to determine whether they see a need for Trauma Sensitive School Environments (TSSE). The paper also seeks to find out how being informed about trauma in schools will improve teacher satisfaction and achievement gaps. To support the discussion, the paper utilizes the Adverse Childhood Experiences study (ACE) highlight how these experiences in childhood can lead to a cascade of social, emotional and academic difficulties. Finally, this paper will provide recommendation as to what can be done to create more trauma-sensitive school environments at the k-12 grade level.

## 2. What Are Trauma Sensitive School Environments?

In order to understand what a trauma sensitive school environment is we must first look at what is trauma informed care. "Trauma Informed Care is a strengths-based framework that is grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma...that emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for

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both providers and survivors...and, that creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment.” (Hopper, Bassuk, & Olivet, 2010, p. 82).

Out of the three schools in Los Angeles County only one of them had a vision and plan to address trauma in school. This school falls within one of the largest school districts in the United States of America — Los Angeles Unified School District in California. According to the LAUSD, School Mental Health takes a Trauma-Informed, multi-tiered approach to student support. Studies over the last 20 years (Roberts, McLaughlin, Conron, & Koenen, 2011; Kendall, Tackett, Marshall, & Ness, 2003; Green & Kimerling, 2004), have made an irrefutable link between exposure to community violence and other Adverse Childhood Experiences, and a host of social academic and behavioral challenges including:

- Decreased IQ and reading ability.
- Lower grade-point average.
- Higher school absenteeism.
- Increased expulsions and suspensions.
- Decreased rates of high school graduation.
- Failing to understand directions.
- Overreacting to comments from teachers and peers.
- Misreading context.
- Failing to connect cause and effect.
- Other forms of miscommunication.

A single adverse experience can cause:

- Jumpiness
- Intrusive thoughts
- Interrupted sleep & nightmares
- Anger and moodiness
- Social withdrawal
- Concentration and memory difficulties

Longitudinal studies of Adverse Life Experiences (ACE) such as abuse, neglect, and extreme family instability have also pointed to an impact across the lifespan for those with multiple such ACEs. This impact includes greater risk for health, mental health, and social difficulties, and a shorter life span. Early intervention offered by L.A.U.S.D. SMH can have a significant, positive effect on these at-risk lifespan trajectories.

According to the L.A.U.S.D. an overwhelming number of students come to school with myriad mental health problems that compromise their ability to learn. Research suggests that schools may function as the de facto mental health system for children and adolescents (Medeiros & Vaulton, 2010). According to Hopper (2010), nationally, only 20% of children in need receive any mental health services. Of those receiving care, up to 80% receive it in a school setting. More than 25% of American youth experience a serious traumatic event by their 16th birthday, and many children suffer multiple and repeated traumas including: abuse, maltreatment and neglect; traumatic loss; serious accidental injury; experiencing or witnessing violence in neighborhoods, schools and homes; treatment for life-threatening illness (medical trauma); accidents and fires; disasters and terrorism.

With LAUSD looking through a Trauma Lens, they can see that understanding a child's past experiences allows them to recognize that behavior may often communicate a student's emotional need. When they shift away from a deficit approach, exemplified by the question, “What is wrong with a student”, and shift to a stance of,

“What may have happened that can explain this behavior”, they create an opening to begin the healing process.

### 3. The Prevalence of Trauma among Children and Outcomes

Studies now show that nearly every school has children who have been exposed to overwhelming experiences, such as witnessing violence between their caretakers, being the direct targets of abuse, and other kinds of adversity. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study found higher levels of traumatic experiences in the general population than previously imagined. Among the approximately 17,000 adults surveyed, just over 50% reported having experienced at least one form of childhood adversity (Roberts, McLaughlin, Conron, & Koenen, 2011). These included physical, emotional or sexual abuse; witnessing their mother treated violently; having a parent with substance abuse or mental health issues; or, living in a household with an adult who had spent time in prison. If we add those who are chronically bullied, experience periods of homelessness, live in the proximity of pervasive community violence, flee war-torn countries, undergo multiple invasive medical procedures, or live with a parent traumatized by recent combat, the number of children affected by significant adversity grows even larger.

Experts explain that trauma is not an event itself, but rather a response to one or more overwhelmingly stressful events where one's ability to cope is dramatically undermined. These experiences in childhood can lead to a cascade of social, emotional and academic difficulties. As students get older, exposure to traumatic experiences can also lead to the adoption of self-medicating behaviors such as substance abuse, smoking, and overeating. All of these responses to traumatic events can interfere with a child's ability to learn at school.

### 4. How Education and Academic Settings (EAS) Address Trauma

L.A.U.S.D. School Mental Health (SMH) professionals provide a continuum of interventions that address barriers to learning and enhance healthy development. L.A.U.S.D. SMH provides comprehensive services that encompass prevention, early intervention, and treatment. These services and programs are provided at school sites, clinics, and Wellness Centers throughout the District. Interventions and supports at the Universal Level include school-wide mental health promotion and efforts to create a welcoming school culture and climate, a safe campus, school connectedness, and positive behavior. The following core competencies have been identified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL):

**(1) Self-Awareness:** accurately assessing one's feelings, interests, values, and strengths; maintaining a well-grounded sense of self-confidence.

**(2) Self-Management:** regulating one's emotions to handle stress, controlling impulses, and persevering in addressing challenges; expressing emotions appropriately; and setting monitoring progress toward personal and academic goals.

**(3) Social Awareness:** being able to take the perspective of and empathize with others; recognizing and appreciating individual and group similarities and differences; and recognizing and making best use of family, school, and community resources.

**(4) Relationship Skills:** establishing and maintaining healthy rewarding relationships based on cooperation; resisting inappropriate social pressure; preventing, managing, and resolving interpersonal conflict; and seeking help when needed.

**(5) Responsible Decision Making:** making decisions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety

concerns, appropriate social norms, respect for others, and likely consequences of various actions; applying decision-making skills to academic and social situations; and contributing to the well-being of one's school and community.

Taking approaches such as these creates a Trauma-Sensitive School Environment, benefitting all students – those whose trauma history is known, those whose trauma will never be clearly identified, and those who may be impacted by their traumatized classmates.

## 5. Methodology

This paper made use of a small-scale research. The sample consisted of 30 teachers who taught at the three EASs — A Nonpublic School (10), Private School (10) and A Public School (10) all residing within Los Angeles County. The sample was chosen because of convenience via snowball sampling. All the participants consented to taking part in the research exercise. Information was collected from the participants by using semi-structured interviews.

## 6. Findings and Discussion

Below are some of the responses given to selected questions by selected respondents from the three EASs that they have taught. The responses selected are a reflection of all the responses from all the participants.

### **Q1. How would you define Trauma?**

Trauma is an event that is unexpected that impacts a person ability to feel safe and secure...It can also cause difficulty with focusing (T12).

### **Q2. Have you had any students that have experience trauma to your knowledge?**

Wow! I have had so many I cannot even count over the past seven years since I have been teaching. I have seen how trauma has impacted the lives of children that I have taught over the past twenty five years. I realize that when students do not have proper services to treat what they have been through it makes my job a lot harder (T5).

### **Q3. How have you worked with/taught children with a known trauma?**

When I know that they have a trauma or have experienced traumatic things I tried to be more patient and empathetic to their situation. For example, if a student comes to class late because they are homeless to due to their mother leaving their spouse that beat them I will not deducted points for arriving to school late. I have even allowed them to stay during recess or after school to make up their work or get a head start on their homework (T15).

### **Q4. How would you describe the school's approach to students that have experienced trauma?**

To be honest I do not believe that the school has an approach. I have worked here for fifteen years and I have never heard of an "approach" to trauma. However, we are encouraged to do workshops on things that we feel will improve our teaching. In addition, we have PDD (Professional Development Days) but those are focus on adapting and implementing common core (T19).

### **Q5. What do you think needs to be done so that your school adopts a trauma sensitive environment?**

I think the first thing that needs to be done is providing education to use as teachers. I think also there needs to be more funding so that we can continue to be trained and provide ongoing services to our students. Finally, I think that it needs to be adopted from the top all the way down (i.e., Superintendent all the way done to the grounds keeping staff) for our school to truly be trauma sensitive (T26).

All of the respondents that participated in the research exercise new what trauma was, however not all of them knew what a trauma sensitive school environment was. The participants all agreed across the different EASs that there needs to be more training on trauma and how to create a trauma sensitive learning environment. It is evident that the participants are not comfortable with teaching children that have experienced trauma, as noted in this comment: *“I’m so afraid of doing harm to the student and because I am not a mental health professional I do not know what to say or not say to the student...so I just don’t say anything.”* One participant even said that *“when students are triggered at school they are sent to a time out room that looks like a holding cell...now how is that trauma sensitive.”*

The common theme among all of the teachers that were interviewed was the lack of education, support and resources for teachers around working with students that have experienced trauma. While one of the teachers reported that she they have resources to send the students to or refer them — but they lack in the classroom training to create that safety for children recovering from trauma.

## 7. Recommendations

Once schools understand the educational impacts of trauma, they can become safe, supportive environments where students make the positive connections with adults and peers they might otherwise push away, calm their emotions so they can focus and behave appropriately, and feel confident enough to advance their learning — in other words, schools can make trauma sensitivity a regular part of how the school is run. Trauma sensitivity will look different at each school. However, a shared definition of what it means to be a trauma-sensitive school can bring educators, parents, and policymakers together around a common vision. We define the core attributes of a trauma sensitive school to include the following:

**A shared understanding among all staff** — educators, administrators, counselors, school nurses, cafeteria workers, custodians, bus drivers, athletic coaches, advisors to extracurricular activities, and paraprofessionals — that adverse experiences in the lives of children are more common than many of us ever imagined, that trauma can impact learning, behavior, and relationships at school, and that a “whole school” approach to trauma-sensitivity is needed.

**The school supports all children to feel safe physically, socially, emotionally, and academically.** Children’s traumatic responses, and the associated difficulties they can face at school, are often rooted in real or perceived threats to their safety that undermine a sense of well-being in fundamental ways. Therefore, the first step in helping students succeed in school, despite their traumatic experiences, is to help them feel safe — in the classroom, on the playground, in the hallway, in the cafeteria, on the bus, in the gym, on the walk to and from school. This includes not only physical safety but also social and emotional safety, as well as the sense of academic safety needed in order to take risks to advance one’s learning in the classroom.

The school addresses students needs in holistic ways, taking into account their relationships, self-regulation, academic competence, and physical and emotional well-being. The impacts of trauma can be pervasive and take many forms, and the way in which a child who has experienced traumatic events presents him or herself may mask — rather than reveal — his or her difficulties. A broader more holistic lens is needed to understand the needs that underlie a child’s presentation. Researchers tell us that if we bolster children in four key domains — relationships with teachers and peers; the ability to self-regulate behaviors, emotions, and attention; success in academic and non-academic areas; and physical and emotional health and well-being — we maximize their

opportunities to overcome all kinds of adversity in order to succeed at school. A trauma sensitive school recognizes the inextricable link that exists among these domains and has a structure in place that supports staff to address students' needs holistically in all four areas.

The school explicitly connects students to the school community and provides multiple opportunities to practice newly developing skills. The loss of a sense of safety resulting from traumatic events can cause a child to disconnect from those around him or her. Typically, children who have experienced traumatic events are looking to those at school to restore their feeling of security and to help reconnect them with the school community. Schools can meet this need if they foster a culture of acceptance and tolerance where all students are welcomed and taught to respect the needs of others. Individual support services and policies that do not pull children away from their peers and trusted adults, but rather assist children to be full members of the classroom and school community, are also essential.

**The school embraces teamwork and staff share responsibility for all students.** Expecting individual educators to address trauma's challenges alone on a case-by-case basis, or to reinvent the wheel every time a new adversity presents itself, is not only inefficient, but it can cause educators to feel overwhelmed. A trauma sensitive school moves away from the typical paradigm in which classroom teachers have primary responsibility for their respective students to one based on shared responsibility requiring teamwork and ongoing, effective communication throughout the school. In a trauma-sensitive school educators make the switch from asking "what can I do to fix this child?" to "what can we do as a community to support all children to help them feel safe and participate fully in our school community?" Trauma sensitive schools help staff — as well as those outside the school who work with staff — feel part of a strong and supportive professional community.

**Leadership and staff anticipate and adapt to the ever-changing needs of students.** In a trauma sensitive school, educators and administrators take the time to learn about changes in the local community so that they can anticipate new challenges before they arise. They do their best to plan ahead for changes in staffing and policies that are all too common in schools. Trauma sensitive schools also try to adapt to all of these challenges flexibly and proactively so that the equilibrium of the school is not disrupted by inevitable shifts and changes.

## 8. Conclusion

The paper explores the current climate of schools in America and the need for schools to have a Trauma Sensitive School Environment (TSSE). This was done by, examining schools awareness and understand of trauma informed and trauma sensitive environments within Los Angeles County. The paper looked at three different schools within the Los Angeles County radius. It also analyzed the interview responses given by teachers who taught a three schools — A Nonpublic School, Private School and a Public School. These teachers' experiences of working with students that have experienced trauma have highlighted the absence of trauma awareness and how to create a trauma sensitive environment when teaching children. Further research needs to be conducted around vicarious trauma among teachers working with children whom have experience trauma; self-care and burnout among teachers working with children that have experienced trauma.

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