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Understanding Trauma-Informed Education

The principal of an internationally recognized trauma-informed school explains what this form of education is—and what it isn't.

By *Mathew Portell*

December 16, 2019



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ACEs (adverse childhood experiences) have made their way into the mainstream over the past couple of years, even showing up in a *segment that Oprah did for 60 Minutes* (<https://youtu.be/dF20FaQzYUI>). And because ACEs have a profound effect on children, the concept has been taken up in the world of education. Approaching education with an understanding of the physiological, social, emotional, and academic impacts of trauma and adversity on our students is driving changes in our systems.

However, these changes are not coming without misconceptions. As the principal of *Fall-Hamilton Elementary* ([/school/fall-hamilton-elementary](#)), an internationally recognized trauma-informed school, I've encountered many misconceptions about trauma-informed education over the past five years. As educators move toward understanding the impact of trauma, including ACEs, and how creating and maintaining positive relationships can serve as a buffer to the negative impacts of trauma, it's vitally important to understand what trauma-informed education is and is not.

6 MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT TRAUMA-INFORMED EDUCATION

1. Trauma-Informed education is solely about a student's ACE score: The *ACE study* (<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childabuseandneglect/acestudy/index.html>) conducted by Kaiser Permanente and the CDC is credited with increasing public awareness of the potential negative health outcomes of adults based on their adverse childhood experiences.

That increased awareness is good, but trauma-informed education is not solely concerned with students' ACE score. We should use the ACE study as a catalyst to look deeper into understanding the broad scope of adversity that children are experiencing but that the study did not include. Trauma-informed education includes examining the influence and impact on students in our schools of *factors such as racism*

(<https://www.nctsn.org/resources/addressing-race-and-trauma-classroom-resource-educators>) (explicit, implicit, and systematic; and microaggressions) as well as *poverty, peer victimization, community violence, and bullying* (<https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/trauma-types>).

2. Educators must know a student's ACE score to successfully intervene: It is not imperative to know a child's ACE score or specific traumatic experience to provide effective interventions. Being trauma-informed is a mindset with which educators approach all children.

Research indicates that strong, stable, and nurturing relationships *foster a feeling of belonging* ([/video/power-relationships-schools](#)) that is essential for all students but is absolutely imperative for healing with students who have experienced trauma. Karen Treisman, a clinical psychology specialist, says, "*Every interaction is an intervention*

(<http://www.safehandsthinkingminds.co.uk/about-us/>).” As educators, we must understand the impact of daily positive interactions and affirmations for our students.

3. Trauma-informed education is about fixing kids: Our kids are not broken, but our systems are. Operating in a trauma-informed way does not fix children; it is aimed at fixing broken and unjust systems and structures that alienate and discard students who are marginalized.

If we view our trauma-informed approach as fixing kids, that creates a deficit mindset. Many kids are doing the best they can in the moment. We must meet all students where they are while supporting them with strong, stable, and nurturing relationships.

4. Trauma-informed educators don't give students consequences for inappropriate behavior: There needs to be a clear understanding of the difference between consequences and punishment. Consequences by definition are designed to teach, while punishment relates to personal suffering.

It's important to set clear boundaries and expectations and then to support students into success. When students do not meet expectations or disregard boundaries, it is imperative to teach and reteach the expectations through *consistent consequences*

(<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept18/vol76/num01/Getting-Consistent-with-Consequences.aspx>)

5. Sometimes you have to escalate a confrontation with a student to calm them down: Co-regulation is the idea of *keeping calm in order to help calm a student*

([/article/role-emotion-co-regulation-discipline](#)) who is experiencing anger, frustration, or fear. A dysregulated adult cannot regulate a dysregulated child. Raising our level of intensity is not a strategy that works.

We should instead use strategies that honor the student's emotions and need for space while also getting their systems to calm in a safe way. This can be accomplished through

first making sure that we really are calm and then by validating the student's experiences and emotions in order to get to the root of what is causing those emotions.

This doesn't mean excusing any poor choices the student may have made—it means ensuring that they're in a state where they can understand and accept any consequences, which is necessary if they are to learn from the experience.

6. I'm a teacher, not a therapist—this isn't my job: As educators explore the complexities of being trauma-informed, we need to remember that trauma-informed work is a journey and not a destination. It doesn't mean that teachers need to do the work of professional therapists. Our part in helping students with trauma is focusing on relationships, just as we do with all of our students. The strong, stable, and nurturing relationships that we build with our students and families can serve as a conduit for healing and increasing resilience.

Becoming trauma-informed in our daily practice is truly a process of learning and adjustment, but it is a worthwhile process.

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October 30, 2020