

TALKING ABOUT SPECIAL EDUCATION SERIES

VOLUME 10

# TRAUMA-SENSITIVE TEACHING

INFORMATION BOOKLET



This pamphlet is one of a series of resources prepared by the First Nations Schools Association (FNSA) and First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) to share information about how to support all First Nations students, regardless of their needs.

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**FNSA MANDATE:**

to collaborate with First Nation schools to create nurturing environments that develop learners' pride and competence in their First Nations language and heritage and equip them to realize their full potential within self-governing First Nations communities.

**FNESC MANDATE:**

to facilitate discussion about education matters affecting First Nations in BC by disseminating information to and soliciting input from First Nations. FNESC's primary goal is to promote and support the provision of a quality education to First Nations learners.

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We hope that these pamphlets provide a useful overview of key special education topics, representing an introduction to issues that some people may want to investigate in more detail. Anyone who requires more information or has specific questions is welcome to contact the FNESC/FNSA special education staff.



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# How Does Trauma Relate to First Nations Education?

Research on trauma has grown considerably over the last decade, and there is now growing awareness that trauma and its related stresses can have very serious impacts on students' development and learning. Indeed, teachers have long understood that students impacted by loss, abuse, illness, and conflict need additional supports, both personally and academically.

In recent years, there also has been increasing attention to the particular effects of trauma on First Nations children, teens, and adults. In addition to the range of factors that cause stress and impact on the mental health of people generally in today's society, the well-being of First Nations people in particular can be undermined by what some researchers refer to as "Intergenerational Indian Residential Schools trauma," or what is more generally called "historic trauma."

Historic (or "historical") trauma is a term used to describe the consequences of systemic and sustained attacks against a group of people, as in First Nations peoples' experiences of colonization and oppression. This type of trauma affects not only the generation of survivors that directly suffered or witnessed traumatic events; it can also impact second, third and further generations.

**NOTE:** in this pamphlet, we use the term "parent" for simplicity, but the information is intended to be inclusive of all family members/caregivers of students with special needs. FNESC and the FNSA respect and appreciate the invaluable contributions of everyone who works to support all First Nations students - regardless of their special talents, gifts, or challenges.

As the Legacy of Hope Foundation ([www.legacyofhope.ca](http://www.legacyofhope.ca)) writes:

Research on intergenerational transmission of trauma makes it clear that individuals who have suffered the effects of traumatic stress pass it on to those close to them and generate vulnerability in their children. The children in turn experience their own trauma.

The system of forced assimilation has had consequences which are with Aboriginal people today. The need for healing does not stop with [Residential School] Survivors - intergenerational effects of trauma are real and pervasive and must also be addressed.

In 2004, in recognition of the final year of the *International Decade of Indigenous Peoples*, the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada published a report titled *Keeping the Promise*, which investigated the lived experiences of First Nations children across a number of dimensions. That report indicates that "First Nations children continue to experience unacceptable, disproportionate levels of risk across all the identified dimensions, ... [including] *current effects of historical traumas to First Nations peoples including those wrought by colonialism and systems of assimilation*" (emphasis added, cited in *First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada*, 2013).

# Understanding Trauma and How It Impacts Learning

Of course, each individual's story and personal circumstances will always be unique, and experiences of trauma often result in different effects in different people. However, the simple fact that a child, teen, or family has experienced some form of trauma means that educators should be alert for associated symptoms and ideally will be ready with ways to help.

Childhood trauma has the potential to interrupt the usual physical, physiological, emotional, mental and intellectual development of children, and it can have wide-ranging implications for health and well-being. Students living with trauma often have difficulty relating to or connecting with others, are easily overcome by anxiety or anger, and may struggle to create meaning from course content.

"When students are in survival mode, their brains are delivering a message that their bodies must respond to. Their behaviors, which are disruptive and often inappropriate, are simply manifestations of what their bodies have been trained to do to survive. Many of these students are, in essence, having normal reactions to not-OK things." (Souers and Hall, 2016)

- Prolonged exposure to chronic stress and trauma alters a child's neurological development. It continually activates a stress response and leads to what is known as "hyper-arousal." In times of great stress, or trauma, the brain activates its deeply instinctive "fight, flight, or freeze" responses. When this happens over and over again, especially in children under age 5, the brain is fundamentally - but not necessarily permanently - changed.
- The capacity to learn and concentrate, develop trusting, reciprocal relationships, regulate behaviour, and make use of self-soothing or calming strategies are all severely affected in children who have experienced trauma - especially in those who have had prolonged exposure.
- Without appropriate interventions and skills development, many children who have experienced trauma may grow into young people and adults who struggle with self-destructive, pain-based feelings and behaviours that may include depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, anger, aggression

and violence, substance misuse, criminal acts, suicidal thoughts and gestures, inactive lifestyles, and difficulty recognizing and expressing emotions.

“Traumatized 5-year-olds are three times more likely to have problems with paying attention and are twice as likely to show aggression.” (Flannery, 2016)

# Trauma Can Be Addressed

**Fortunately, the damaging effects of trauma can be mitigated - including the educational challenges that often result.**

While neurobiological research shows that traumatized students cannot learn when they are over-stressed, evidence also shows that schools can make a positive difference in the lives and learning experiences of students who are impacted by trauma by understanding and responding to their unique needs, minimizing stressful situations, and teaching important coping skills.

According to Souers and Hall (2016), current statistics indicate that 70 percent of trauma-affected youth do go on to lead successful, productive lives. The authors further argue that if more schools adopt strength-based, trauma sensitive approaches, even more positive results can be attained.

According to *Helping Traumatized Children Learn*, a book by Susan Cole, Director of the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative (TLPI) at Harvard Law School and Massachusetts Advocates for Children, while trauma can impact learning, behaviour, and relationships

at school, trauma-sensitive schools can lessen challenges, help students feel safe so they can learn at high levels, and assist with their healing processes in meaningful ways.

First and foremost, whenever possible schools - working in partnership with other community service agencies - can connect trauma-affected children, teens, and ideally their families, with access to appropriate counselling services. Professional guidance and support can make a significant difference in the lives of students and their families.

Additionally, trauma-sensitive learning environments can help to nurture resilient learners by building strong relationships with students and families, creating safe spaces, and focusing on strength-based approaches that help students learn to seek solutions and break negative cycles of anger and stress.

Unfortunately, childhood trauma is often difficult to identify in schools. Stress and trauma are commonly demonstrated uniquely in each individual, in various settings, and at different times. Not all children or families are able or willing to share with school staff details about

their lives. As a result, trauma too often can remain hidden.

“It is estimated that one half to two-thirds of children experience trauma. ... All schools and educators work with children who have experienced trauma, but you may not know who these students are. Schools have an important role to play in providing stability and a safe space for children and connecting them to caring adults. In addition to serving as a link to supportive services, schools can adapt curricula and behavioral interventions to better meet the educational needs of students who have experienced trauma.” (Education Law Centre, [www.elc-pa.org](http://www.elc-pa.org))

Therefore, it is often most effective to universally implement trauma-sensitive strategies (strategies that can actually benefit all learners), thereby reaching the most vulnerable students, even if their specific circumstances are not always obvious.

For example, the following are a few pro-active steps that can help to create trauma-sensitive schools and classrooms.

## FORMING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS TO BUILD GREATER RESILIENCE

The relationship between students and a school's staff is a crucial factor in how children and teens who have been impacted by trauma will function at school. In order to learn, students must feel that they are emotionally and physically safe during their school day, and teachers and Educational Assistants (EAs) are especially able to directly address that need. Additionally, all of the people working at the school can take advantage of opportunities to connect with students and let them know they are valued.

- Fostering positive relationships with traumatized children starts with recognizing that early adversity has played a role in their neural development. They are not to blame for their reactions. Behaviours that now threaten these children's academic and social achievement were originally adaptations to the uncontrollable stress in their lives.

“Here's what NOT to do: punish a child for showing symptoms of a medical issue.” (Flannery, 2016)

- It is critical to acknowledge that relationship-building will not always be easy. Students who have experienced trauma often don't know how to ask for or accept the support they need. In fact, some trauma-impacted students



may behave in ways that actually push others away. Many children with early trauma histories have a compulsive need to reenact past difficult events – with the hope that the outcomes might be different. Unfortunately, this tendency can be mistaken as provocative or defiant behaviour, rather than seen as an understandable coping mechanism.

- If challenging behaviours occur, teachers and other school staff must try to remain objective, not taking the actions personally and instead working to de-escalate problematic behaviours in calm, respectful, and kind ways.
- Whenever possible, it is helpful to use strategies that communicate comfort and concern, and emphasize a commitment to establishing meaningful, positive relationships with all students. These approaches, while sometimes difficult, will be worth the effort.
- Teachers and EAs can reassure students that the relationships they have built together are strong by establishing and maintaining clear, well-understand boundaries while also staying composed in moments of crisis. Seeing that their teachers are neither frightened nor surprised by strong emotions can increase students' abilities to tolerate uncomfortable feelings themselves -- eventually helping vulnerable students build their capacity for self-control.
- Even simple gestures, such as a compassionate word or a friendly handshake, can have a big impact. Traumatized students are almost always on high alert as a result of their constant stress. Kind words and actions help students feel safe and more relaxed - but remember that physical affection can be uncomfortable for some people, so always follow each student's lead.
- If it is difficult to connect with particular students, it might be useful to write down a list of their strengths to help focus on their positive attributes, use student surveys to learn more about their personal interests, and then set a goal to personally connect with them in a new way at least once or twice a week. Try, try, and keep trying.
- Children impacted by trauma are often especially attentive to what they perceive as negativity from adults. Too often, they expect to be judged and/or rejected, and these students may display a guarded attitude. To overcome these challenges, it is useful to remind students of things that are going well, emphasize their strengths, and show that people in the school

genuinely care about them - even if the students are unable to readily return the positive gestures.

### **FOCUSING ATTENTION AND CREATING PREDICTABLE STRUCTURES**

To gain the trust and attention of students, predictable and regular classroom routines can be very beneficial - and in fact, almost all students thrive in consistent classrooms with carefully structured, ordered lessons.

- Well-established procedures help students understand what is going on and what is expected of them. Normalcy can be profoundly healing and comforting, particularly for students who do not feel in control of their lives. Starting each morning with a positive greeting and a short classroom meeting to review the events of the day ahead helps students feel welcome and comfortable. Simple visual icons representing major events of the day or a posted daily schedule can help students feel prepared and keep track of classroom activities.
- Students who are touched by trauma may be reluctant to participate in classroom activities that involve risk-taking. Students - especially those who appear nervous or tentative - should be allowed to gradually increase their willingness to try new

tasks that make them feel uneasy or anxious, letting them take on new challenges as they begin to feel more at ease.

- Students who are continually stressed may be more focused on what they perceive as survival rather than what is being taught. These students may appear forgetful and seem to lose track of content-area ideas from one day to the next. If this is the case, intentional strategies for increasing focus are useful. For example, it can be beneficial to design lessons so they follow the same sequence of steps, using a standard format and regular cues that students will learn to recognize over time. Additionally, deliberately focusing students' attention on instructional content as it is presented, perhaps using fun props or creative, entertaining strategies, can help children develop the neural pathways required for sustained attention.
- Transitions and unexpected circumstances can be especially difficult for students effected by trauma, as sensing a loss of control can activate their stress response. For some students, even common transitional cues, such as ringing a bell or dimming the lights, can trigger stress, so it is most helpful to announce these cues before actually using them. Teachers implementing a trauma-sensitive approach try

to avoid abrupt and unexpected changes, but they also prepare students for the fact that there will be surprises, such as fire drills, etc.

- Proximity can also help. Standing near vulnerable students during especially active periods or transitions can provide an extra sense of security; having a calming presence nearby can reduce stress and help students be better prepared to focus on learning and stay on task.

### TEACHING STUDENTS TO UNDERSTAND AND CONTROL EMOTIONS

Within the safety of a predictable classroom environment, teachers can purposefully show students how to control their emotions and teach them skills to regulate their feelings and understand the role of stress in their reactions.

- This work can begin with encouraging students to observe and be aware of their own feelings, and then helping them learn to choose how to respond appropriately to those feelings. Sometimes this can involve explicitly teaching children how to understand and identify different types of emotions, and perhaps assisting them in setting daily goals for behaviour and participation that take their feelings into consideration. School staff can help children begin to separate who they are from what

they feel – an especially important step for students with early trauma histories.

- When students understand how stress affects their minds and bodies, they can take active measures to reduce and control these reactions. Therefore, it can be helpful to provide a short lesson on stress and the brain early in the school year. It is often helpful for teachers and other school staff to model or role-play appropriate and effective ways to deal with conflict or disruption.

### CREATING ENVIRONMENTS THAT HELP STUDENTS REGULATE THEIR EMOTIONS AND BEHAVIOUR

Early childhood trauma affects every aspect of children's stress regulation. Some children will "fight" or become hyper-aroused under stress, resulting from a subconscious effort to protect themselves. In a classroom environment, these students may appear to be defiant, angry, overly aggressive, disrespectful, and capable of prolonged acting out behaviour. Other children show "flight" tendencies, "zoning out" or "drifting off" when their stress level becomes intolerable. These students may appear unmotivated, disinterested, and may even fall asleep. Rather than shutting down, however, these students may be focusing on safety rather than paying attention.

- To help lessen both types of reactions, integrating soothing, sensory-based activities into classroom instruction can help to reduce stress, such as strategies that involve quiet movement, deep breathing, music, stretching, and frequent opportunities for self-reflection. In fact, all students can benefit from short “movement breaks” or brief calming activities every 30 minutes or so, allowing them to “reframe the brain.”
- Keeping the classroom uncluttered, with calming neutral colours, can be helpful for hyper-aroused students. Using regular, brief check-ins and encouraging students to take breaks when needed can also help. Some teachers offer a “comfort zone” - a quiet space or room for children who feel overwhelmed - sometimes using something as simple as a bean bag chair. Encouraging students to draw or engage in other creative projects for a few minutes may help them to decompress after especially active lessons or situations.
- Collaborating with students to identify relaxing strategies that work for them can be valuable. Students know their own needs and preferences best. Talking to students about self-soothing activities they can use to feel better also reinforces the idea that teachers are there to support them. It is ok to ask students directly what they need to feel better

and have more focus. They may ask to listen to music with headphones or put their head on their desk for a few minutes, or request easy access to nonverbal stress-busters, such as stretching, worry stones, or fidget toys. It is important to send students a message that they will be held to high standards of behaviour at school, and to achieve that goal their feelings and needs will be valued and considered, and all of the adults in the school will do their best to help them succeed.

## **AVOIDING BURN-OUT AND FRUSTRATION**

Trauma in students' lives can take an emotional and physical toll on teachers, as well.

Recent research is suggesting that trauma can effect entire school communities, and that professionals who work with traumatized populations are at risk of secondary traumatic stress. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, for example, indicates that secondary traumatic stress can degrade professional effectiveness and impact negatively on teachers' personal health.

- It is important that school staff take care of themselves, as well as their students. According to the Treatment and Services Adaptation Center, knowledge is a key way

to manage secondary traumatic stress. Schools should be pro-active in communicating with staff and families about trauma, and everyone working in the school can support one another by discussing and preparing coping mechanisms to use when stressful situations arise. Talking about the times of day that are usually the most stressful and difficult also can help everyone to consider ways to schedule activities that might prevent problems from arising.

- Those steps should be supplemented by frequent small group check-ins, regular exercise, a healthy diet, and sufficient sleep. Activities such as yoga or meditation can be helpful in reducing general stress. If possible, the school could possibly organize such activities as a group. School staff also can encourage one another to take time away from stress-inducing situations, perhaps spending time with family or friends, or focusing on a relaxing project or hobby.

Remember - healthy people are more effective in helping others, and students who have experienced trauma especially need support from adults who practice self-care themselves.

“It is no small feat to get some teachers to even talk about their own needs, let alone address them with action - yet it is a foundational step in the process of becoming a trauma-sensitive practitioner. If we aren’t physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually healthy, we cannot reasonably expect to be able to help our students become healthier and more successful in school.” (Souers and Hall, 2016)

### FINAL COMMENTS

With the right information, schools can become trauma-sensitive settings that help students who have been impacted by serious difficulties in their lives. Schools can achieve that goal by promoting better understandings of what is behind trauma-related behaviours, supporting school staff in pro-actively connecting with students who face personal, academic and behavioural challenges, and designing classrooms with the needs of vulnerable students in mind. **Schools that build their capacity to respond to trauma can and do help build resilience so that their students can learn effectively and grow into healthy adults.**

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