

Frequently Asked Questions about Trauma-Sensitive Schools

What is a trauma-sensitive school?

A trauma-sensitive school is one in which all students feel safe, welcomed, and supported and where addressing trauma's impact on learning on a school-wide basis is at the center of its educational mission. It is a place where an on-going, inquiry-based process allows for the necessary teamwork, coordination, creativity and sharing of responsibility for all students, and where continuous learning is for educators as well as students.

Read more about the attributes of a trauma-sensitive school.

Why does trauma sensitivity require a whole-school approach?

The nature of trauma is that it can cause feelings of disconnection from the school community that undermine students' success. Experts explain that a welcoming, supportive community can help children overcome these feelings and diminish the severity of the trauma response. As schools are communities for children, these findings reinforce what many educators and parents already know implicitly –that a supportive school-wide environment can play a significant role in addressing the needs of students who have endured traumatic experiences.

It is critical that children feel safe and connected to others in all parts of the school not just in one program or with one teacher. Furthermore, if students are to solidify their skills in developing relationships, in self-regulation, and in academic and nonacademic areas, and use these skills to participate fully in the school community, they need to practice and become fluent using them everywhere in the building, not only in one class or small group. Finally, school staff will not always know if a given child's problems grow out of traumatic experiences. The best approach is to make sure we provide trauma-sensitive learning environments for *all* children. A whole-school approach that values teamwork, coordination, and collaboration will enhance the school experience for all.

Read more about a whole-school approach to trauma sensitivity.

Should schools engage in the process of screening for students who have experienced traumatic events?

It is not appropriate or necessary to screen all children in an attempt to identify which ones have had traumatic experiences. This can further stigmatize students who may already feel alienated and, potentially, cause more harm. It is also difficult to ensure that disseminating a child's trauma history is handled with appropriate care and responsiveness at a school. Many experts feel that children who speak with their teachers about their experiences often later feel regret and withdraw from these much needed relationships. This does not negate the obligation of teachers to report reasonable suspicions of child abuse or neglect, but rather serves as a warning against probing into the

particular details of a traumatic event. When students disclose abuse or neglect to an educator, it is very important to comply with educators' obligation to report. But addressing trauma's impact on learning does not depend on having full information about a student's traumatic experiences. The best approach is to ensure that trauma-sensitive learning environments are provided for all children, regardless of whether an individual student is known to have a traumatic history.

What's the difference between the terms "trauma-sensitive" and "trauma-informed"?

The term "trauma-sensitive" school describes a school in which all students feel safe, welcomed, and supported and where addressing trauma's impact on learning on a school-wide basis is at the center of its educational mission. The focus is on creating a whole-school culture that serves as a foundation for *all* students to learn and experience success at school.

The term "trauma-informed" arose in the behavioral health field. According to SAMHSA, "trauma-informed" refers to the delivery of behavioral health services in a way that "includes an understanding of trauma and an awareness of the impact it can have across settings, services, and population."

TLPI believes it is important to distinguish between the terms "trauma-sensitive" and "trauma-informed" in order to recognize the different roles of schools and behavioral health providers. The term "trauma-sensitive" helps emphasize that educators are not expected to take on the role of therapists. It also helps emphasize that, while behavioral health services will be an important part of the effort, helping traumatized children learn at school requires more—it also requires a school-wide culture that helps children feel safe and supported in all parts of the school.

What is the difference between a whole-school inquiry-based process for becoming trauma sensitive and a program-oriented approach?

Unlike some educational programs that emphasize fidelity to a pre-established template, a whole-school inquiry-based process for creating a trauma-sensitive school is fluid and embraces the unique circumstances of each individual school community. Such a process empowers educators to look holistically at their school's infrastructure and gain greater clarity about the ways in which its school operations may be encouraging or hindering success. It describes a process for overcoming these barriers so that the school can address locally identified priorities in trauma-sensitive ways. The goal of such a process is for schools to become trauma-sensitive learning communities where new ideas and expansive thinking are nurtured and where synergy and teamwork make it possible to explore complex issues.

What is TLPI's model of systemic change?

Making trauma sensitivity a regular part of how our nation's schools are run will require everyone – parents, educators, administrators, behavioral health providers, advocates, and more – working,

learning, and advocating together. TLPI focuses first on learning from some of our most vulnerable families and their children about what students need; we do this through representing families in our Education Law Clinic at Harvard Law School. We also work directly with educators in schools to learn what they require to address students' needs. We bring what we learn from families and educators—along with up-to-date research—together to produce publications, and we work across disciplines and with parents to create a collaborative advocacy agenda. All of this growing knowledge informs our advocacy for laws, policies and funding streams that set the conditions for schools to become trauma sensitive learning environments where all students can succeed.

