

## Chapter 1

# Trauma Foundations

*The day starts at 8:40 a.m. with grab-and-go breakfasts in the classroom, the inevitable cereal sloshing onto desks, plus two sticky juice spills, requiring full binder, desk, and floor wipe-downs. Today's special is Guidance, which is held in the classroom. Although it is my designated planning time, the time is spent redirecting behaviors and helping the novice school counselor, all while trying to check homework folders. One of my most challenging students refuses to follow directions, despite ultimatums from the counselor. Yelling, the student charges from the classroom, ignoring my suggestion that he retreat to the designated chill zone. I follow him to the time-out room and confer briefly with the interventionist; we agree that I should contact the parent. This, unfortunately, escalates the student's verbal tirade.*

*Back in the classroom, I go over directions and pass out a math assessment. Already, the need for reading assistance with the assessment is frustrating several students. Someone with high anxiety starts to bang his hands on his desk and lament, "I will never be done with this test!" The special education teacher arrives to provide support for identified students. I glance at the clock: it's 10:30 a.m. I am not only off schedule, I am tired.*

*My student returns from the time-out room, momentarily contrite, but it's his third trip in two days—clearly this is not working, but it's the only choice I have. We have been teaming about him since September and have yet to find a behavior plan that works consistently, and which doesn't escalate his behavior. He even struggles with positive supports.*

*I visually check on my English language learner (ELL) student, whose mother had tearfully told me through a translator that her daughter had been assaulted. I worry about this student because I know she goes to testify in court soon. Not surprisingly, she's picking at her paper but not writing. I am momentarily grateful that this was not one of those days when my administrator pops in for a walk-through evaluation. Then I wish she would, because I wish that she could witness firsthand all that I am juggling. We close out the written portion of the test and take a breath. We are all in need of a break.*

*I'm a seasoned teacher with more than 30 years of experience. I hold multiple degrees and I regularly engage in training opportunities. My teacher toolkit is heavily stocked, and I strive to match my experience and training with a depth of caring, spending a great deal of time building community in the classroom and with families. Despite all of this, I find that the strategies I have learned are ineffective with many of my students with trauma histories. I know I need a new approach, but I don't know where to start.*

## THE BIG PICTURE

Think of trauma-related student behavior as a wave in the ocean. Most of us would agree that the crash and roar of water breaking against the shoreline grabs our attention the most. It is noisy, full of churning energy, and quite capable of knocking us off our feet. It pulls, pushes, and tugs on us in ways that demand our immediate and intense focus. We worry about the undertow dragging us away from where we stand.

If we look out past the white caps, though, we can see the origins of the wave, though we are not as aware of it in that form or of its potential. Once we catch our breath from our struggles at

the shoreline, we must shift our focus to the larger forces that created the wave, which formed and gathered momentum long before it crashed on the shoreline. In our schools, we need to deal with the urgent moments—the crash at the shoreline—but we also need to be able to understand the broader dynamics at work—the out-at-sea needs—and address them proactively.

Each intervening collective, whether an individual educator or a school's entire staff, must assess the unique needs of its students, as well as the needs of the supporting adults, and find the balance between reacting and preventing. Only when the needs of both are met can staff provide robust and cohesive behavior supports. A well-rounded set of tools allows us to successfully navigate the turbulent times at the shore and the rolling swells out at sea that are the challenging behaviors of our children with trauma.

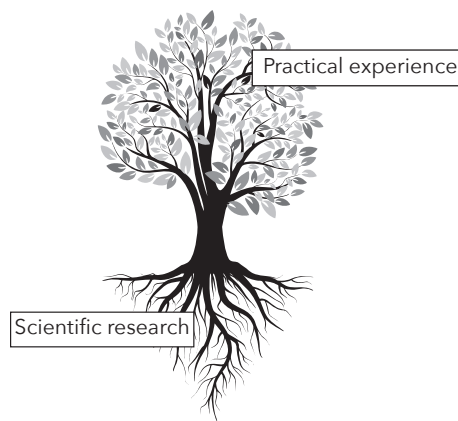
## The Layout of the Book

This book is designed to be a reflective guide to trauma-informed behavioral practices. As is depicted in Figure 1.1, it is rooted in scientific research and has grown in the sunlight of practical experience in classrooms and schools. The materials are divided into three sections that include resources directly related to the content of each section. These resources include a glossary of terms, expanded information, samples, directions for creating tools, and more.

In Section I, we lay the foundation for all that follows. We explain our carefully considered use of language and terminology and place behavior in a trauma-informed context. We also connect our approach to trauma-informed behavior supports with other practices that you may already have in your educational setting, including mindfulness, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Responsive Classroom Approaches, and restorative practices. We also share our five core principles of trauma-informed behavioral practice.

Section I also examines the most educationally relevant concepts regarding childhood trauma. We define **trauma**, examine its potential etiology, and identify some of its manifestations in the lives of the children we seek to support. We share what neuroscience tells us about the physiological impacts of childhood trauma—including dysregulation—and then consider the psychological impacts—including attachment and trust.

In Section II, we explain the Re-Set Process, a trauma-informed practice that profoundly influences what happens at both the shoreline of student behavior and out at sea. This process is a scientifically sound, educator-friendly methodology we developed based on our extensive experiences working with students of trauma. The Re-Set Process has been refined



**Figure 1.1.** The phrase *rooted in science and grown through practical experience* emerged to describe the evolution of the Re-Set Process.

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through nearly a decade of implementation practice and through the input of a multitude of educators, including school counselors, classroom teachers, special educators, principals, psychologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech and language pathologists, paraprofessionals, and the students themselves.

We begin by providing an overview of the process, and then thoroughly examine the proactive and reactive forms of Re-Set. We also provide the information needed to implement the various Re-Set Process structures in your classroom or school. We devote a chapter specifically to the Re-Set Room, where the most intense proactive and reactive forms of the Re-Set Process occur. It is important to note that, although it is preferable that the Re-Set Process be embedded throughout the practices of a school, many educators have used some form of it successfully within their own smaller sphere of influence. This section closes with a chapter about implementing the Re-Set Process and addresses questions that many readers are likely asking themselves—namely, where to start and what steps to take.

Section III discusses related proactive strategies such as creating predictability, protecting emotional safety, nurturing relationships, and building regulation skills. These are the “out-at-sea” strategies. In the vernacular of a multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), these are the underpinnings of a trauma-informed Tier 1 approach. (A Tier 1 approach is universally supportive and targets all students.) Ultimately, it is Tier 1 strategies that make the biggest systems-level impact if we attend to them in an integrated and collaborative manner. Many of these strategies fall within the purview of individual teachers for use within their classrooms, even if a building as a whole is not focusing on being trauma-informed.

Section III also examines common behavior management strategies that are incompatible within a trauma-informed approach. We discuss how to make language that is related to reinforcement and redirection more trauma-informed and empowering for the student. We consider the risk factors that are associated with many familiar classroom systems and other behavioral practices, and then offer alternatives that are sensitive to the vulnerability of students with trauma histories and that build connection with others and self-confidence in the student.

Our final chapter focuses on educator self-care and is followed by an appendix, which provides a set of guided questions for use in a book study group or a professional learning community (PLC).

## Our Carefully Chosen Language

We have found that the language we use in this work is incredibly important, and we have thought carefully about how we reference trauma, particularly in the educational context. We deliberately use the label *trauma-informed behavior practices* in discussing our body of work. We have found that other ways of talking about trauma (trauma-informed care and trauma-sensitive approaches) sometimes inadvertently communicate to educators that they are expected to be therapists. Terms such as trauma-informed interventions may connote that there is a need to wait for trauma to show up before intervening, which is not the case with the Re-Set Process.

Of course, these terms are widely used in the field, and there are many powerful understandings, strategies, and resources that appear in conjunction with them. For the purposes of this text, we have chosen the term trauma-informed behavior practices in order to speak as directly and intentionally as possible to our audience of educators about what they can do, day in and day out. We want it to be abundantly clear: We are not asking teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, and support personnel to become therapists. We are asking them to engage in a set of practices that fit their education and training and their roles and responsibilities, as well as their school contexts. We want to convey that trauma-informed behavior practices are both proactive and reactive in nature and account for the complexities inherent in the bodies and minds of students with trauma histories.

You may notice that we often address the reader as a classroom educator, sharing strategies that are specific to the classroom environment. The Re-Set Process is bigger than the classroom, however. On a more macro level, administrators, professional developers, and other school leaders who are reading this book will gain critical knowledge and encounter tools for planning and implementing the Re-Set Process and related trauma-informed practices. Whatever your position or sphere of influence, this book will provide you with a new lens and new strategies for supporting all students, including those with a history of trauma.

As you read about children with trauma histories, we invite you to think deeply about the difference between how they may present on the outside and how they actually feel on the inside. Sometimes their behavior misleads adults, causing us to believe that they are tough and should be handled firmly when, in fact, their behavior may be a protective shell designed to contain the pain they have experienced. Children may curse, throw things, reject, bluster, and say things such as *I don't care* or *I hate you*. In these moments, we ask you to pause and consider that children with a history of trauma are vulnerable, and their growth may be uneven and tenuous. Our hope is that you are compassionate in interpreting challenging behavior and thoughtful in your decision-making. Students with trauma histories are some of the strongest, bravest children we have encountered and simultaneously the most fragile. It is our responsibility as educators to handle them with care.

Student and teacher names in the case studies are fictitious. All identifying information—including which one of us was involved—is either not provided or has been changed to protect privacy. Some case studies are reflective of several situations that were highly similar and that have been amalgamated into one story. Notes From the Field were written by practitioners from urban, suburban, and rural schools and are identified only by role and level.

Finally, we consciously made the decision that, for the most part, so that the material would read more cohesively, the book would reflect us as collaborative authors rather than be a set of separate experiences and thoughts. To accomplish this, we have chosen to use the third-person *we* throughout the book.

## Understanding Behavior Through a Trauma-Informed Lens

It seems like we cannot open an educational journal, a list of podcasts, or a series of social media group postings without seeing the word *trauma*. The word is bantered about in casual conversations, and it is seriously examined in more professional venues. We use it colloquially (*oh, my gosh, I was so traumatized by . . .*) and precisely (*this student has experienced significant trauma as a result of . . .*). Like many concepts of human behavior, educators come to the notion of trauma through myriad entry points, and they react to it with a wide variety of responses based on their support, skills, experience, and education.

In order to be effective in anything we do to support our students with trauma histories, the very first thing we must do is recognize that this wave is a different kind of wave—a rip tide, if you will. We need a new lens through which to view behavior, and we need to have confidence that, once we *apply that lens*, we are in a better position to do better. We cannot simply go with our gut, our habits, our defaults.

To continue our analogy, we need to proactively understand the dynamics and conditions of rip tides long before they reach the shore. Reactively, we need to recognize signs that a rip tide exists and have strategies for the time when we are caught up in one. We need to let go of strategies that may have worked in other conditions but that will not work in these conditions, such as trying to swim directly back to shore when caught in an actual rip tide. We need to rely on the research of what works in these conditions and use those strategies even if they feel temporarily uncomfortable, such as when one floats or swims parallel to the shore for a period of time when being pulled out to sea by a rip tide.

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What does this mean in behavioral practices? First, we need to accept that the behavioral methods we have known and implemented may not fully position us to design intervention that is compassionate, effective, and efficient for students with significant trauma histories. We need to consider that some familiar behavioral practices may be insufficient or counter-productive and even ethically questionable when used with students with trauma histories. Once we accept that trauma calls for new ways of thinking, we are poised for success because we are open to new approaches.

Now, if that leads to you feeling overwhelmed, let us assure you of several things:

- The most critical intervention for all behavioral change is a positive, nurturing relationship between student and adult—this still stands true.
- Effective instructional techniques still matter.
- Strategies developed for students of trauma tend to also support students without significant social, emotional, and/or behavioral needs.
- Many of your practices may need only to be adjusted or refined rather than completely abandoned.

To know what to hold on to, what to alter, and what to leave behind in order to design effective behavioral support, the behaviors of students with trauma need to be seen through that new lens. Seeing through a trauma-informed lens allows us to:

- Reframe behaviors that have perplexed us, annoyed us, alienated us, frustrated us, and angered us as manifestations of a student's trauma—as part of what happened to them, not something they are choosing to do to us—thereby developing a deeper compassion for our students who challenge us.
- Understand that our gut reactions to behavior may make the situation worse.
- Accept that behavioral interventions that work for many of the students we teach may simply *not* work for children of trauma.

A trauma-informed lens allows us to envision different kinds of strategies and practices—ones that move beyond simply controlling or containing behaviors to addressing the neurological and attachment needs of these students. If we merely implement something different without changing our mindset about the origins and underlying needs of behavior, we may subtly defeat our own dedicated efforts. New understandings lead to critical nuances in our interventions, which result in greater success for our students and for us.

How does trauma-informed behavioral practice fit with everything else that is going on in your school district—the academic curricula, the standards, the new classroom materials, ever-changing technology expectations, testing, social and emotional instruction, and more? Here is the really good news: As we already shared, much of what you already are doing probably addresses trauma and may lay the groundwork or provide the structure for supporting students affected by trauma. Practices that match the needs of students with trauma histories already exist in the context of many other school approaches, although they might be a bit fragmented or too low in intensity. The thing is, with a trauma-informed lens in place, a school, or an individual educator can determine valuable practices that are already occurring and enrich those practices in an intelligent, focused manner. As educators consider where they invest their energies, it is also important to consider what we mentioned briefly already—that most trauma-informed practices make a difference to a significantly broader group of students than those with trauma. When undertaken with intention and collaboratively, these practices can create a culture that supports students with a

host of needs—students who are tired, who may be experiencing temporary stress, who are perfectionists, who struggle with anxiety or depression, or who have autism—just to name a few. The bottom line is that a culture that is rich in relationship and understanding is a culture that is good for all students.

Are you thinking, *Great, one more thing on my already full plate?* Rest assured, you do not need a place in your schedule for trauma-informed practices time. These practices are integrated into your relationships, your instruction, your interactions, your transitions, and your environments. It is about applying that new lens to the whole of what is done throughout schools, including classrooms, hallways, special classes, student services offices, classroom meetings, parent-teacher conferences, playgrounds, school buses, and extracurricular events. The lens and resultant approaches are fully mobile and can be flexibly integrated into the life of the classroom and school.

### Applying a Trauma-Informed Lens to Your Practices

In Section III, we examine classroom culture and give you a chance to reflect upon your practices. When you apply a trauma-informed lens to what you do as an individual educator, you are invited to reflect on your personal practices. During your reflections, you may find that what you are already doing works well for students with trauma histories. We describe these reflections as *Affirmations*. You may also find yourself making thoughtful adjustments based on your new knowledge, which we describe as *Attic Treasures*, *Refinements*, and *Careful Considerations*.

**Affirmations** There are many things you are doing day in and day out that are very effective practices for students with trauma histories. We are guessing you will have many affirmations, such as the following example:

*The routine students follow upon entering my classroom that I introduced to them at the beginning of the year/semester instills predictability and a sense of comfort that allows for more successful academic and behavioral performance.*

**Attic Treasures** As you reflect on new learnings regarding trauma, you may realize that you did things in the past that are a good fit and reinstitute them into your teaching practice. An example of an attic treasure is:

*I used to take time at the beginning of each school year to do getting-to-know-you activities with my students. We did a different one as part of the class throughout the first 5 days of school. As the academic intensity ramped up, I found myself eliminating these. As I learned more about the importance of making connections and feeling emotionally safe, I reinstated this practice. I felt confident in doing this because I also had come to understand that this wasn't fluff or just something nice to do—it was important because students with better connections tend to function better behaviorally. I realized that I would be able to make up the time because, ultimately, I would spend less time in redirections and conflict disputes.*

**Refinements** There may be some things that almost work but that need some adjusting in order to really fit students with trauma. Often educators find that these minor tweaks result in major impact. An example of a refinement is:

*Most of my students are energized by the competition of review games. Knowing that competition can shut down students with trauma, I made a change to the way that teams compete.*

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*Previously, teams earned points by answering questions correctly—the goal was for one team to beat the other. Now I create four teams that huddle together to generate answers. The scores from all four teams add up to a total classroom score. Once the class reaches a certain number of points, they all earn a 10-minute social time. With this new practice, I get the needed review in and my students work together to be productive—win-win!*

**Careful Considerations** Certain strategies may best be set aside until the timing is more appropriate. As you reflect on learnings about trauma, you may find yourself becoming more selective in the strategies you employ at certain times of the year. We all adjust to the students we have in front of us each year, but awareness of student stress and trauma may lead us to be more deliberate as we select what we will do to fit our current student group. An example of a careful consideration is:

*I often use the cooperative group structure of four students teaming together right from the beginning of the school year. When you're an individual in a group of four, it takes fairly sophisticated social skills to navigate relationships with three other people at one time. Students of trauma, in particular, may struggle with this, so I hold off on the quad-grouping and use partners only until I get a better sense of how students are functioning together.*

## CONNECTED EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES

Many schools systemically support practices and initiatives that are trauma-informed, specifically mindfulness in schools, PBIS, Responsive Classroom, and restorative practices. It is no surprise that these current, research-based practices are promising for children of trauma—they were developed and assessed for their effectiveness in the context of today's student population. We want to specifically acknowledge the powerful role that these practices have in supporting students with trauma histories.

### Mindfulness in Schools

Based on long-time success in broader fields like health care, mental health, stress management, human resources, business, sports, and law, mindfulness emerged as a field within education around 2001. In some contexts, the practice of mindfulness intersects with spiritual practice. That is *not* the case in the educational practice of mindfulness. As is true in many other settings, mindfulness approaches in schools are purely secular in nature.

Within the countless applications and implementations, mindfulness as a practice or as an outcome has been defined in many ways. One definition might be paying attention to the present moment with openness and compassion. Another is single-tasking. Yet another is what emerges when we attend to the present moment in a particular way. Most approaches include purposeful, mindful practices that train attention to select, direct, and sustain focus. A trauma-informed approach to mindfulness in schools includes choice (how and how much to engage), flexible expression of practice, routine check-ins to ensure individual comfort, and opportunity for reflection.

Repeated present-moment awareness for people of all ages can be simple and challenging at the same time. Consistent mindful practices in the classroom can lead to changes in self-awareness, self-care, emotion regulation, concentration, and mental flexibility, which can then lead to improved self-regulation in the classroom and beyond. Mindfulness has been proven to strengthen the working memory portion of the brain, mitigating some of the impact of trauma. Mindfulness practices can be still, active, individualized, synchronized, loud, quiet, calm, or

energized. Mindful movement is becoming more and more useful in reaching and engaging populations with diverse needs and across a wide range of ages.

Mindfulness and the practices that are inspired by it may have a similar foundation and intention, but they can look very different from one classroom to another and from one day to another. Definitions and expressions can take many turns depending on the teacher, the group of students and the needs of each classroom. When we try them out and make the practices our own—as the adults leading it—mindfulness can become a powerful personal habit and an invaluable gift that we give our students, no matter what their histories.

Foundations of mindful awareness and invitations to engage in mindful practices have been woven throughout this book. Whether labeled or implied, there are threads of mindfulness within the foundation of the Re-Set Process and these will be explored along the way. Specific resources to enhance and expand your understanding of its possible role in your setting are provided at the end of some sections.

### **Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports**

According to the U.S. Department of Education technical assistance centers (National Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports [PBIS], n.d.), PBIS is a framework for supporting students in schools. Structures, strategies, and assessments are organized across three tiers of intensity. Tier 1 is universal practices designed to support all students, Tier 2 is targeted supports for groups of students who are non-responders to universal practices, and Tier 3 is intensive interventions that are designed to support the needs of an individual who has not responded to the supports of the previous two tiers. In the PBIS framework, the concept of intensity reflects increasing levels of supports—people, time, and individualization—in order to meet the needs of students.

Broadly, PBIS is designed to help schools and agencies become more effective and efficient while also enhancing equity for student with disabilities, students of color, and other marginalized populations within those systems. PBIS targets all students (PBIS, n.d.) and, by creating a positive environment, aims to improve students' academic and social/behavioral functioning. As such, PBIS is poised to provide a sound framework in which trauma-informed practices may occur if care is taken to align the goals of both fields.

PBIS frameworks includes

- The use of evidence-based, respectful, non-punitive, prevention-oriented behavior practices
- A focus on skill teaching and reteaching as necessary
- The availability of a continuum of supports that meet the needs of all students
- Data-based decision-making
- Ongoing assessment of students' needs as individuals and as subgroups
- Family and community involvement
- Involvement and cohesion across all adults in the school, and even across the district (PBIS, n.d.)

Within that framework, there is a fair amount of space for local implementation considerations, with guidance provided by trainers associated with PBIS. This flexibility is the opening for making PBIS highly trauma-informed.

Two of the original driving developers and researchers behind PBIS were Dr. Rob Horner from the University of Oregon and Dr. George Sugai from the University of Connecticut.



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For close to thirty years, Dr. Horner has been guiding and studying school behavior practices that shift school culture toward more productive, successful environments for all students. When speaking about PBIS, Dr. Horner often shares the four characteristics of behaviorally successful schools—they are “predictable, consistent, positive and safe” (Horner, 2011, 2015).

Interestingly, Dr. Bruce Perry, a medical doctor who focuses on child and adolescent psychiatry, identifies the same needs when considering what it takes to support a developing child. In summary notes from a lecture describing trauma-informed practices—available through his website—Perry states that, “If [a child’s] world is safe, predictable, and characterized by relationally and cognitively enriched opportunities, the child can grow to be self-regulating, thoughtful, and a productive member of family, community, and society” (Perry, 2005, para 3).

Clearly, from the perspective of leaders in these two fields, the broad goals of PBIS and those of trauma-informed practices are aligned. If a school system embraces a PBIS approach and operationalizes it with fidelity, that system is positioned to provide critical support to students with trauma histories. Some of the specific practices that align with the needs of students with trauma-histories are as follows:

- Clearly defined positive expectations (predictability)
- Explicit instruction in expectations (nothing is assumed, what is expected is taught)
- Consistent language across adults (focused language, consistency)
- Positive, concrete reinforcement of expected behaviors (recognition of successes that helps student see self as positive)
- Visual display of expectations (appeals to an easier way to process—visual input)
- Non-classroom areas are monitored (safety, opportunities for positive noticing, relationship-building)
- Classroom-managed behaviors are defined (expectations are clear and consistent, increasing predictability)
- Office-managed behaviors are defined (consistency, creating emotionally and physically safe environments for all, decreases the likelihood that students of trauma will be over-sent to the office)
- Data-based decision making (decreases the likelihood that students of trauma will be over-identified or disproportionately receive consequences)
- Tiered supports (opportunities for increased coaching/instruction, additional reinforcement opportunities, engagement of community supports as behaviorally indicated)
- Family involvement (consistency, opportunities to support the whole child) (PBIS, n.d.)

From the universal design methods such as core expectations (Tier 1) to the methodologies and supports provided at the small group level (Tier 2) and to the intensive, individualized level (Tier 3), there are myriad ways that the needs of students with trauma may be addressed. Because PBIS is a framework and not a limited set of practices, it can easily be the perfect structure in which to house and organize school supports related to trauma. Wisconsin State Superintendent Tony Evers, in the publication *Using Positive Behavioral Interventions & Supports (PBIS) to Incorporate Trauma-Sensitive Practices into Schools*, makes this explicit connection between the structure and practices of PBIS and the needs of students with trauma-histories (Evers, 2016).

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## ***Notes From the Field***

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Trauma is an important consideration as schools build out their tiered behavioral frameworks in order to be responsive to individual student needs. We can no longer approach behavior with a one-size-fits-all model, particularly as we seek to provide equitable disciplinary practices. The backgrounds of students cannot be ignored. PBIS calls us to reframe problematic behaviors and consider them as indicators of needs, perhaps some of which might be related to childhood trauma.

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## **Responsive Classroom Approaches**

The practices of the Northeast Foundation for Children Responsive Classroom model began in a small, private lab school and quickly expanded into the much larger forum of Washington, D.C., public schools. Since then, the Responsive Classroom model has been implemented widely across the United States in rural, suburban, and urban public school settings. Responsive Classroom practices have been developed both for elementary and middle school settings—Grades Kindergarten to 8 (K–8) (Responsive Classroom, n.d.).

From the outset, Responsive Classroom, an evidence-based approach to education, sought to integrate academic and social/emotional goals. This allowed students to develop their social/emotional skills in the context of learning and, conversely, how to learn in the context of relationships. Based on a set of developmentally driven practices that include Morning Meeting, Logical Consequences, Small Things Time-Out, Guided Discovery, and Procedures and Rules, the model has focused on making learning a joyful, relational experience (Charney, 1992).

Responsive Classroom's approach to behavioral issues has always been that behavior, like academics, is something to be explicitly taught. This developmental orientation translates to understanding the individual's needs, which is core to trauma-informed practices. Responsive Classroom also focuses intently on emotional safety and maintaining predictable, consistent routines with supports. Once again, the alignment with the goals for serving children of trauma well is clear: safe, nurturing, predictable, and consistent (Responsive Classroom, n.d.).

The Responsive Classroom approach moves beyond simply having similar goals. Brain-based understandings support Responsive Classroom structures, making the approach an excellent fit for students with trauma. The approach emphasizes the importance of teacher modeling—both for behavior and academic inquiry purposes—and providing time for children to think for themselves rather than rushing to simply follow through on adult directives. It also encourages the use of visual supports, laughter, and fun. The Responsive Classroom model emphasizes the importance of classroom rites and rituals and articulates the need for respectful interactions, even at the most difficult times.

With just a quick look at Responsive Classroom's Morning Meeting structure, it is abundantly clear how synchronous this approach is with the needs of students with trauma. Here are some of the components of a Morning Meeting and their benefits to students with trauma histories:

- Routine use of Morning Meeting (predictability, consistency)
- Ordered structure within Morning Meeting (predictability, consistency)
- The act of gathering in a circle (connection opportunity)
- Use of specific signals within Morning Meeting (predictability, consistency)

- Greeting—smile (dopamine release), positive touch (dopamine release and building tolerance to touch), name (connection, experience of name being a positive thing), laughter (dopamine release), the greeting itself (serve and return opportunity)
- Sharing—connection opportunity, positive social interaction (dopamine release), listening/speaking opportunity (serve and return practice)
- Group activity—smile (dopamine), laughter (dopamine), movement (burn off stress chemicals), incidental touch (building tolerance to touch, decreasing hyperreaction to touch stimuli), games themselves may offer additional opportunities (modulation, serve and return practice), opportunity to be trusted with materials and social interactions
- Morning message—settling opportunity, guided shift from social to academic thinking (modulation), expectations for day (predictability)
- Option to pass or to do adapted version of greeting, sharing (emotional safety)
- Teacher language—encourages reflection through guided questioning (personal agency)

Responsive Classroom focuses extensively on nurturing the caring, guiding adult tone that is critical in implementing any trauma-informed practice. It also emphasizes developing a student's internal voice—the ability to develop one's own guiding moral center, to have confidence in one's abilities, and to self-reflect on one's choices. As a child-centered, development-centered, strategy-specific approach, it provides a sound structure for any adult who is looking to support students of trauma.

## Restorative Practices

Restorative practices, like Responsive Classroom, is a relationship-based approach to interactions between adults and students and between students and students. Like PBIS, it is a framework to nurture positive student behavior and to handle—in a meaningful way—issues with misbehavior. Also, like PBIS, it emphasizes proactive over reactive measures, looks to teach new sets of behaviors to students, and involves the whole school community.

Some of the guiding principles of restorative practices that are found in almost every school's implementation guide includes the encouragement of personal reflection, accountability for one's behavior, and healing for both adults and students. Based on the structure of a restorative justice approach, these practices have been adapted for the school setting. The approach seeks to develop positive relationships among students through community-building meetings and then, again, much like Responsive Classroom's problem-solving model, seeks to address interaction issues within a supportive peer circle as appropriate (Center for Restorative Process, n.d.).

This model works well in tandem with PBIS and similarly supports the concept of enhanced student voice that the PBIS framework promotes. Like PBIS, it offers levels of support of increasing intensity that fit well within PBIS's three-tiered framework.

According to the San Francisco Unified School District Restorative Practices Resource Packet, the benefits of restorative practices approaches in the school setting include

- A safer, more caring environment
- A more effective teaching and learning environment
- A greater commitment by everyone to take the time to listen to one another
- A reduction in bullying and other interpersonal conflicts

- A greater awareness of the importance of connectedness to young people—the need to belong and feel valued by peers and significant adults
- Greater emphasis on responses to inappropriate behavior that seek to reconnect and not to further disconnect young people
- Reductions in fixed term and permanent suspensions and expulsions
- A greater confidence in the staff team to deal with challenging situations (Student, Family, and Community Support, n.d.)

Again, we see the common threads of safety and positivity reflected in the benefits noted in the preceding list. When done with fidelity, restorative practice supports the development of teacher skills and related teacher language, and it addresses the relationship-building opportunities among students—all of which are foundational for supporting students with trauma histories. Because of its emphasis on student voice and reflective thought, restorative practices directly support the development of agency, which is a profound need for many students with trauma histories. Finally, its focus on healing over blaming is extremely aligned with trauma-informed approaches.

Some districts we've worked with have found that using the Responsive Classroom model for the elementary years and the restorative practices model for the secondary years creates a cohesive approach by using language and concepts that make sense to educators at those two different levels.

Our review of these four connected practices has been superficial, and yet, it clearly illuminates some specific ways in which these broad approaches fit with trauma-informed practices. As you become more trauma-informed, we have no doubt that you will see many more connections for yourself.

## CORE PRINCIPLES OF TRAUMA-INFORMED BEHAVIORAL PRACTICE

*When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me, "Look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping."*

—Fred Rogers (2003, p. 187)

Before we can move forward with any discussion of intervention and change, as the helpers—implementers, guides, coaches—we need to orient to the core principles that guide trauma-informed school practices. Like the North Star, these five principles help us chart our course and continually provide direction as we go. As a reader, they should help you understand the practices that we discuss in this manual more profoundly and support you as a practitioner in the field when you are faced with uncharted territory.

### Principle 1: Develop a Trauma-Informed Lens

Trauma-informed teaching begins with recognizing our universal needs through a caring, non-judgmental lens and recognizing that all people involved—including ourselves—are affected by trauma. This lens does not require that we know or learn the initial cause, the long-term source, or the personal details behind anyone's wounding—just that we know and feel that these elements possibly exist. We always assume that trauma is present in the room and we, therefore, recognize behavioral issues as a manifestation of that trauma.

This sort of lens also involves thoughtfully, openly, and proactively examining what we do including our behavioral practices, interactions, word use, and modeling of self-regulation. Developing this lens enables us as professionals to empathize with students, avoid triggering behaviors, and create a safe learning space.

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## Principle 2: Establish Safety in All Environments and Interactions

Safety is not about metal detectors, double-locking doors, or armed guards. Those are security measures. Security is provided by external factors that enhance physical protection, limit accessibility, and lessen threats. Ironically, some of our efforts to make our schools more secure can actually make some students feel less safe and more anxious, increasing the need to focus on developing a comprehensive sense of safety for all students.

What is safety? Safety stems from an inner sense of stability, efficacy, and trust in oneself and trust in others. Safety grows within a person, a family, a peer group, or a classroom. It develops when we learn through repeated experience to trust the information we detect through our own senses. With that learned ability and awareness, we come to trust our own instincts and act through our personal choices. We feel safer when we practice self-care, which eventually shifts to demonstrating care within the many social groups to which we belong.

Safety is a preventative measure. It addresses the causes that can lead to the need for security within a community. Inner safety can lead to outer expressions of empathy, healthier social interactions, and healing. These, in turn, lead to inclusion and collaboration which then lead to real changes in students, groups, and schools. Bullying is reduced. Isolation and the resulting depression can be lessened. Competition can become a healthy motivator instead of a harmful divider. Marginalization and incidents of violence become less prevalent. Hearts, minds, and behaviors shift as safety and other core issues are addressed.

Teachers need tools and support to create this type of safe learning environment—one built on a culture of trust. Daily, teachers can model safe behavior by pausing to notice the moment, attending to one thing at a time, recognizing their role in setting the tone, adjusting to diverse and often adverse situations, openly caring for others, thinking carefully about the words they use, knowing when they need their own time-out, addressing bullying consistently, and speaking directly about safety as non-negotiable in their classrooms.

Research shows that social and emotional skills around safety can be taught, learned, and practiced in our schools. Teachers are uniquely equipped to meet students where they are and to guide them toward new skills. Explicitly taught curriculum can lead students to notice what they need, encourage them to speak up, and support them to create safety for themselves and their peers. Structures such as community/class meetings can invite student voices forward and encourage children of any age to act as more powerful forces in creating a physically and emotionally safer environment.

Although our goals should be to establish this broad sense of safety for all students, we can establish a sense of safety within the space of a single interaction with one student. Our body language, voice tone, words, expressions, and how we prioritize safe expectations can be powerful components for creating safety for each student at every moment.

## Principle 3: Read Your Students

As we have acknowledged, language is powerful, especially the words we use in a classroom. For some students, we need to be even more cognizant of the words we use and what they may trigger. Some words that seem innocuous may need to be replaced because they can be triggering to students who have been victimized.

Consider these commonly used words: deep, spread, and bend. We integrate them into instructions almost every day. *Take a few deep breaths and then begin your test. When you write your answers, spread out your digits so I can read your numbers. Clean-up time—bend over and pick up any scraps of paper under your desk.* In a trauma-informed classroom or counseling office, the educator would be aware of the possibility of reactivating trauma and may deliberately change their language using safer words instead. *Breathe out all the way a few times and*

*then begin your test. When you write your answers, put space between your digits so I can read your numbers. Clean-up time—look and reach below your desk to pick up any scraps of paper.* We also see some students triggered by having their names called or by certain behaviorally related words like *No!* or *Stop!* We may want to consider how we can replace those words and practices at the times that it makes sense to do so.

Of course, we cannot eliminate all triggering words from our vocabulary, but if we notice the words that routinely escalate a student, we can develop verbal habits that reduce triggering. We can practice using alternative words. We can deliberately call the student by their name paired with a genuine compliment—which begins to make their name a positive rather than a negative. We can give directives that tell what to do rather than what not to do. The point of this principle is not to have us hesitate every time we open our mouths to talk with our students. It is more about taking the time to tune in to how our language may be affecting our students and adjust accordingly.

We also need to tune in to the fact that some students may be triggered by nonverbal actions in the classroom—by something in our body language or our movements, or by the physical positions we ask them to assume. We have experienced students who would panic when approached quickly and others who would escalate if we crossed our arms while in conversation. Again, the point of this principle is not to have us feel frozen in place for fear of moving in the wrong way. Rather, it is an invitation to pay attention to how movement and positioning impact our students.

On a personal level, we have learned to recognize our own signs of dysregulation—and so have our family members! Wynne's son learned at a young age that when mom's right ear turns red, it is in his best interest to pause, back away, and engage later. He knew that mom needed some cool-down space and, if he continued to push, question, or challenge, his wishes would not be met with the empathy and understanding he hoped for. Wynne's sign of dysregulation—her right ear turning red—is a physical and visual cue. As awkward as it seemed at first, she liked being aware of this simple but consistent early-warning signal. It has helped her and her son navigate the frequent parent-child power struggles with some grace. Upon noticing the ear, Wynne's son might choose to wait until later to engage. Or, if Wynne felt the heat rise, she might ask for a moment before responding.

Noticing early indicators of needs is a two-pronged principle. When supporting our students, it means reading early signals that indicate rising dysregulation before problem behaviors are demonstrated. The better we know students, the more we can jump in and intervene, and the earlier we do that, the more likely we are to reach a positive outcome. Ideally, by really knowing the student, we can anticipate the situations and conditions that tend to lead to rising dysregulation and make a change even before those early signs emerge in full force. Chapters 2 and 9 provide more information about dysregulation.

On the adult side of things, noticing early indicators of needs also means reading ourselves. What are our early signs that we are being knocked off-kilter? What can we do to intervene with ourselves? How do we take care of ourselves amid caring for classrooms full of students? While we certainly cannot walk out of our classroom when the needs of our students are overwhelming us, we can do things to keep ourselves better regulated all along the way. We will take a look at this a bit more in Principle 5.

## **Principle 4: Invite Student Choice**

Choice is a set of opportunities within a framework of limits and guidelines. Bring choice back into the daily lives of students—all students, not only those living with the choiceless moments of trauma and the dysregulation that follows. Choice does not mean removing structures,

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ignoring rules, or lowering standards. Even minimal choice-making ensures that when options can be provided, students get to reclaim the power they lost, maybe even long ago.

You might wonder, if students get to choose for themselves—won't chaos follow? What if they do not do what we want them to do? Great questions! Let's clarify what we mean in the following scenario: The class sits in chairs during a sleepy, midmorning work time. Is there an opportunity for choice? Absolutely. First, we take time to sense our own experience, mindfully. Then, we model that awareness, followed by choice, and encourage our students to do the same. *I am sitting here feeling drowsy and need to stand for a few minutes. Notice how you feel. Stay in your seat or stand behind it to feel more awake. It's up to you.* Students participate by noticing and choosing for themselves. That is what we mean by the principle of inviting choice.

Classrooms are filled with even simpler opportunities for choice: how to sit at circle time, which book to read, what color crayon or pen to use, where to settle for solo work, which topic to examine for a research paper, or which mindful practice to try when agitated. Other settings in school provide opportunities for choice also: where to sit in the library, when to ask to see the school counselor, who to talk to in the hallway during passing time. Triggering is minimized when we encourage individual choice in moments both big and small.

For children who have experienced choiceless moments, healthy, age-appropriate choice is a critical part of healing. This principle is about providing a balance of both structure and opportunity as appropriate to the age and needs of our students.

## Principle 5: Respect and Nurture Yourself

Parker Palmer asserts in *The Courage to Teach* that “we teach who we are” (Palmer, 1997, p. 1). This means that the nervous system you bring to the classroom impacts your ability to connect with your students. Because secondhand stress is real and transferable, we are responsible for caring for ourselves first, and then bringing our best selves to our relationships and our work. Ancient wisdom tells us that an empty pitcher cannot fill another.

This principle is about knowing what fulfills you, and then taking the time and care to access those things. Remember: Self-care is not selfish—it is strengthening. Self-care is what sustains us in caring for our students. This wisdom comes in the form of the safety message we hear on airplanes at the beginning of a flight: Be sure to secure on your own oxygen mask before tending to the needs of others. These ideas are not new, yet, as educators, we continue to struggle with putting them into action.

When thinking about self-care, we also need to consider what can a school system do to provide supports for adults—otherwise known as “community care.” One of the most effective behavior plans for an extremely traumatized, intensely acting-out student that we ever developed was one that gave that child's teacher a 15-minute break part way through the morning. We had the student spend those 15 minutes with the school counselor, which gave the teacher a break from what they described as walking on eggshells for the first two hours of the day. That 15 minutes served the student well and occurred during a time when the teacher also needed it—win-win. Chapter 11 examines these topics of self-care and community-care and will provide you with an opportunity to reflect on your own plan.

We hope that when you finish exploring the strategies shared within this book, you will feel

**Honored and affirmed:** We hope that you close this book with a more acute understanding of how much we honor the work that educators do every day and how skilled you already are before even reading this book. Your knowledge and skills make a difference to the children in your circle of influence. Celebrate that.

**Energized and equipped:** Of course, we hope that you will have learned some strategies that will make a difference in your practice. We want you and the students whose lives you touch to be even more successful. We also hope that you will have new insights and strategies at the ready and be well equipped to move forward.

**Compelled and confident:** You might think, *Compelled? Confident?* Yes and yes! Compelled to collaborate—to gather ideas from others and to confidently share yours. Compelled to learn other ways to think about trauma and to confidently share these with others. We are acutely aware that collaboration has brought us some of the best practices of our careers and, in turn, has given us the opportunity to share the best of what we know. This work is too hard, too complex, too exceedingly important to do alone or without confidence in your abilities. Be of brave heart!

Regardless of your personal entry point into this content, and whether you are reading this book as part of your own personal/professional growth or as part of a system that is collaboratively searching for answers to complex challenges, we welcome you on this journey. But before you dive in, we also invite you to pause—to remember who this is all about. Whether you are standing at the riotous shore or sailing miles out on the rolling sea, always keep your eyes and heart on the students with trauma histories who, without your informed and compassionate work, might be lost in the waves.

## A Closing Note to Readers

The topic of trauma is a difficult one for all of us. Whether you have personally experienced significant trauma or have borne witness to the trauma of others, trauma leaves its mark. As you read and interact with the materials that follow, please monitor its impact on you. As you begin this book in earnest, please remember that you can pause at any time. When you notice irritation or hesitation, pause, fold the page corner or slip in a bookmark, take a moment, and return when you wish. Consider the following mindfulness practice when you experience your own feelings of dysregulation:

### **Sense You Are Here**

*Settle in your chair, with your feet solid on the floor.*

*Hands rest in your lap. Eyes gaze forward or closed.*

*Detect the sensations in your body that indicate that you are here, in this moment.*

*Sense that you are here, right here, right now.*

*Feet, seat, back, hands. Shoulders go down. Body is still. Sense you are here.*

*If you notice that you are tense in your body, take another, more significant moment to care for yourself.*

*Try something just for you—go for a walk, pet your dog, grab a cup of coffee or tea, stretch, twist, yawn.*

*The key?*

*Notice what you need. Do that. Return when you are ready.*



**W**hen students with histories of trauma struggle with self-regulation and exhibiting appropriate behaviors, traditional interventions often fall short. Educators need a clear and consistent trauma-informed process to help students re-regulate and return to learning—and that’s exactly what they’ll find in the Re-Set Process, a **neuroscience-based approach to improving behavioral success in children from Grades K–8**. Re-Set is a structured yet flexible set of explicitly defined steps that are easy to integrate into an individual teacher’s classroom or throughout a school’s student support system.

This comprehensive guide also examines the science of trauma, explains how trauma impacts students’ functioning, and provides the reader with practical strategies for meeting trauma-based needs. Readers have access to a complete package of **more than 30 online downloads** to help implement the Re-Set Process, including planning forms, blank templates, activity sheets, and a book study guide suitable for individuals and groups.

Integrating critical concepts from the fields of trauma-informed care, positive behavior supports, and mindfulness, this book is a vital resource for classroom teachers, school counselors, administrators, and other professional support personnel.

**“Now is the time to create a trauma-informed community for our learners with and without special needs. Educators of all experience levels will find this resource invaluable in that work.”**

–Matthew Ammons, M.Ed.,  
Director of Student Services,  
Hamburg School District, PA

**“During times of high community stress, attention to emotional regulation is more than timely—it is essential. This book is a critical step in the right direction. It helps educators move past wondering what to do, to an empowered stance of how to do this work.”**

–Carol Powell, Ph.D.,  
Assistant Superintendent for  
Curriculum and Instruction,  
School District of Lancaster, PA

**“The Re-Set Process constructs a roadmap for students toward their emotional well-being, equipping them with sustainable skills that allow for success not only in the school setting but also throughout their lives.”**

–Camille Hopkins, M.Ed.,  
School Principal,  
Pennsylvania Distinguished Principal,  
Ross Elementary School,  
School District of Lancaster, PA

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS:** **Dyane Lewis Carrere, M.Ed.’s** influential career in education spans more than 40 years and has taken many forms—teacher, administrator, adjunct faculty member, consultant, and staff developer. Her work has concentrated on developing practical, compassionate supports for students whose behavioral struggles have placed them at the fringes of school success. **Wynne Kinder, M.Ed.’s** respected teaching career spans 30 years in public and private schools and includes 15 years of guiding mindfulness and trauma-informed strategies in regular, special, and alternative education classrooms (Pre-K–Graduate-level).