



# Trauma-informed practice in early childhood education



ECE resources

A trauma-informed organisation, such as an early childhood setting (ECE), is one which ‘realizes the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices; and seeks to actively resist re-traumatization’<sup>1</sup>. Trauma-informed practice in schools and early childhood centres has grown in recent years, and educational settings are increasingly implementing educational programmes and school policies to help teachers become more aware of the impacts of trauma on children and young people<sup>2</sup>. Trauma-informed programmes and policies are important to support teachers who are tasked with supporting the complex needs of children and families impacted by trauma.

## The impact of trauma on children and young people

While the types of trauma experienced in early childhood are similar to those experienced by young people and adults across the lifespan, trauma in early childhood can seriously [risk](#) a child’s cognitive, social and emotional functioning, and their ability to learn<sup>3</sup>. Young children are more reliant on their parents for survival and are less able to seek help, to make sense of their experiences, or to protect themselves from danger. Due to this, parents, guardians and early childhood teachers play an important role in developing trusting relationships, fostering safe environments, and supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of young children exposed to trauma<sup>4</sup>. For more information on types of childhood trauma and the many ways it can impact a child or young person, see [Childhood trauma and its impact](#).

## Signs that a child has experienced trauma

Noticing the signs of trauma is the first step in responding to children exposed to trauma. Trauma can present in various ways, including behavioural, cognitive, social or emotional difficulties. Students who have experienced trauma may have behavioural problems which is their way of communicating their distress and soothing unpleasant emotions, or because they lack interpersonal and impulse control skills<sup>5</sup>. These behaviours can sometimes be misinterpreted as trouble-making by teachers and other children<sup>6</sup>. In ECE settings, a child who has been exposed to trauma may present in the following ways:

- Reluctance to attend ECE settings, possibly because they have concerns about interacting with teachers or peers
- Reluctance to leave ECE settings and distress about returning home at the end of the day
- Avoiding questions about their home and family
- Playing out violent themes or stories during play
- Regressing in their ability to care for themselves or engaging in risk taking behaviours. For example, younger children may show regressive development or changes in how they communicate (for example, using ‘baby talk’)
- Changes in behaviour such as withdrawal, aggression, impulsiveness, inattention, anxiety and/or negative moods<sup>7</sup>.

## Recommendations for trauma-informed practice in ECE settings

Early learning settings can support children who have been exposed to trauma by implementing the following recommendations:

- Assess the readiness of the centre or setting to determine whether appropriate resources, time and leadership support are available to implement trauma-informed practices
- Increase the knowledge and understanding of [cultural differences](#) in the presentation of trauma symptoms in children and parents.
- Increase educators' personal awareness and acknowledgement of their own cultural and belief systems.
- Encourage the inclusion of parents in understanding their child's development and the use of techniques and tools at home.
- Engage in educator training and professional development that addresses trauma and children's emotional and social wellbeing<sup>8</sup>.

## The evidence base on trauma-informed practice in early childhood education

Research concerning trauma-informed practice in early childhood settings has occurred mainly in the USA. Some of the trauma-informed programmes that have been evaluated in early childhood education settings include:

- [The Supportive Trauma Interventions for Teachers](#) (STRIVE), a resiliency-based intervention that is implemented with individual children, teachers, schools and early childhood settings. STRIVE aims to improve children's learning environments by increasing teachers' understanding and self-efficacy in supporting the needs of young children who have been exposed to trauma<sup>9</sup>.
- [Head Start Trauma Smart](#) (HSTS), an early education intervention that is implemented within early learning settings. HSTS aims to reduce the stress reaction experienced by children who have been exposed to trauma by building children's and caregivers' resources and skills<sup>10</sup>.
- [Attachment, Self-Regulation and Competency](#) (ARC), a flexible framework for trauma-informed interventions that aims to integrate children's trauma experiences through strengthening the caregiving system, building awareness and skills in self-regulation, and developing children's resilience<sup>11</sup>.

Evaluations of these programmes have found that teaching early childhood teachers about childhood trauma and trauma-informed practice can increase their knowledge and confidence, and improve the early childhood learning climate and relationships between educators and children<sup>12</sup>. However, broadly, there is a lack of research concerning the benefits of trauma-informed practice in educational settings, especially in early learning programmes.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (2014). SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach.
- 2 Berger, E., & Martin, K. (2021). Embedding trauma-informed practice within the education sector. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 31(2), 223-227.
- 3 Dye, H. (2018). The impact and long-term effects of childhood trauma. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 28,3, 381-392. DOI: 10.1080/10911359.2018.1435328

- 4 McConnico, N., Boynton-Jarrett, R., Bailey, C., & Nandi, M. (2016). A framework for trauma-sensitive schools. *Zero to Three*, 36(5), 36-44.
- 5 Gerson R, & Rappaport N. (2013). Traumatic stress and posttraumatic stress disorder in youth: Recent research findings on clinical impact, assessment, and treatment. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 52(2), 137-43. doi: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2012.06.018; Hertel, R., & Johnson, M. (2013). How the Traumatic Experiences of Students Manifest in School Settings. In *Supporting and Educating Traumatized Students: A Guide for School-Based Professionals*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- 6 Downey, J. A. (2008). Recommendations for fostering educational resilience in the classroom. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, 53, 56-64. <https://doi.org/10.3200/PSFL.53.1.56-64>
- 7 American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders, Fifth edition (5th ed.)*. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>.
- 8 McConnico et al., 2016.
- 9 McConnico et al., 2016.
- 10 Holmes, C., Levy, M., Smith, A., Pinne, S., & Neese, P. (2015). A model for creating a supportive trauma-informed culture for children in preschool settings. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 24(6), 1650-1659.
- 11 Blaustein, M. E., & Kinniburgh, K. M. (2018). *Treating traumatic stress in children and adolescents: How to foster resilience through attachment, self-regulation, and competency*. Guilford Publications.
- 12 McConnico et al., 2016; Saint Gilles, M. P. (2016). A pilot study of the effects of a trauma supplement intervention on agency attitudes, classroom climate, Head Start teacher practices, and student trauma-related symptomology. Michigan State University.  
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**PREPARED FOR THE EDUCATION HUB BY**


### Emily Berger

Emily Berger is a Senior Lecturer and Registered Psychologist in the School of Educational Psychology and Counselling, Faculty of Education, at Monash University. Emily also holds an Adjunct Senior Research Fellow Position with the School of Rural Health at Monash University and regularly publishes and conducts research into the effects of disasters, trauma and stressors on children and families.



### Karen Martin

Karen's passion is to assist with improving the mental and physical health of vulnerable and disadvantaged populations. Over the past 20 years, Karen has undertaken research within schools, prisons and community settings in diverse health fields including trauma and adversity, psychological and post-traumatic distress, and domestic violence. With a team of passionate researchers Karen generated the International Trauma-Informed Practice Principles for Schools (ITIPPS) and created the Thoughtful Schools Program, which is being pilot tested in Western Australia. By sharing knowledge and experience in assisting schools to become trauma-informed using research evidence, Karen aims to ensure that future school environments are places where young people feel supported, cared for and safe.