

# Trauma informed practices and pedagogies for early childhood teachers



ECE resources

Trauma-informed practices and pedagogies are valuable across educational contexts in providing care and ensuring safety for all children. In early childhood education (ECE), there is opportunity for teachers to invest in trauma-informed approaches to enhance and sustain their connections with children and families. This research review explores the philosophies, pedagogies, and resources which teachers can embrace when pursuing trauma-informed ways of working. It also explores the significant contribution that trauma informed practices can make in the short, medium, and long term for children, families, teachers, and communities.

## What is trauma informed practice?

While trauma is often associated with abuse and life-threatening experiences, it can extend beyond this<sup>1</sup>. [Martin and Berger](#) provide the following definition along with some key examples:

Trauma results from an event, series of events, or circumstances that are physically or emotionally harmful, or life threatening.... Sometimes referred to as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), these events include child physical, sexual and emotional abuse, neglect and maltreatment, and household adversity, such as parent mental illness, family violence, substance abuse, incarceration, and separation and divorce.

Important to note is that trauma has no boundaries in relation to identity – it can be experienced and can be something that people live with regardless of gender, sexuality, race, socioeconomic status<sup>2</sup>, or other aspects of identity. That said, through an intersectional lens<sup>3</sup>, we can understand how different experiences of trauma, discrimination, and marginalisation overlap and compound<sup>4</sup>.

[Trauma-informed practice](#) is characterised by an understanding of trauma and its impacts, a recognition of the indicators of trauma, and a preparedness to respond and to prevent re-traumatisation. This review will focus on trauma-informed practices and pedagogies relevant to the early years of children's lives (birth to eight years of age) and ECE settings.

## Why is a trauma-informed approach important in ECE?

The early years of a child's life and their engagement with early learning are an important opportunity to support and sustain children's learning and development. There is also opportunity to nurture the wellbeing of children and their families<sup>5</sup>. Children and families come to ECE settings with complex histories, circumstances, and needs which are deserving of recognition and understanding. This may include ACEs, family trauma, or trauma experienced by parents and carers. Particularly within the first five years of a child's life, there is significant risk from the effects of ACEs and trauma to their development, with potential long-term consequences<sup>6</sup>. By embracing and enacting a trauma-informed approach in ECE, teachers can better work towards caring for all children and creating meaningful relationships with families. This can contribute to protecting children from future risks, such as the risk of ACEs eventuating in mental health issues like anxiety and depression in adolescence<sup>7</sup>.

Trauma-informed approaches are also important in contributing to children's learning and achievement. Trauma and adverse experiences in the early years can impact learning and educational outcomes in a variety of ways<sup>8</sup>. For example, Cole and Camillo write:

When students feel unsafe or marginalised or are in a state of fear, their focus on survival can make their brain unavailable for learning at school. Trauma and overwhelming stress can affect memory, the ability to make logical inferences and to analyse stories, and the capacity to stay focused. Executive functions, such as planning and carrying out a learning task, can become disorganised. Moreover, children can lose trust in the adults and peers around them<sup>9</sup>.

The risk of reduced **executive functioning** is a key point to note<sup>10</sup>. Executive functioning comprises three key components which support participation and progression in learning for children and young people – these are inhibitory control, cognitive flexibility, and working memory. These components are the neural basis of executive functioning, and the implications for teachers include understanding the context surrounding children's challenging behaviours and possible pathways forward through trauma-informed practice and social-emotional learning<sup>11</sup>.

While trauma-informed approaches are holistically supportive and can serve the entire community within a centre or school, it is important to note how they may contribute to caring for and protecting vulnerable people and communities. For example, in a recent systematic review of research focusing on ACEs within Northern American Indigenous populations, it was evident that ACEs were higher in Indigenous populations and linked to increased suicidality and psychological distress. The authors noted protective factors to reduce these risks, including cultural identity and connectedness, education, and resilience<sup>12</sup>.

Ultimately, it is critical for centres, schools, and their communities to collaboratively invest in trauma-informed approaches to ensure that all children and their families are cared for, and to safeguard the learning and development of young children.

## What do teachers need to consider?

There are a number of core considerations which can help teachers build their awareness and preparedness with regards to trauma-informed practice in the early years. This includes centring children by honouring their identities, needs, rights, perspectives, and experiences and placing this at the heart of our practice. It also involves continuing to embrace play and play-based pedagogies, considering one's own wellbeing, and remaining attentive to how our knowledge around trauma-informed practice is developing and growing.

Through a trauma-informed approach, emphasis is placed on understanding how children's experiences and needs inform their behaviours. There is a rejection of punitive responses and interactions, and instead a focus on empathy<sup>13</sup>. A **culturally responsive approach** is also integral to deeply understanding children and families – a potential challenge here is where teachers experience a disconnect with families, which can inhibit the opportunity to engage in culturally responsive and trauma-informed practices<sup>14</sup>.

**Play** is also critical. The right of children to play and its benefits are well-established<sup>15</sup>. With regards to trauma-informed practice, play and play therapy offer important pathways forward. Play therapy – which has several incarnations, such as child-centred play therapy – is gaining recognition and respect as an effective method of intervention<sup>16</sup>. Natural settings and nature play can be particularly helpful; in facilitating nature play through a trauma-informed lens, it is important to stay informed about the opportunities and challenges that children living with trauma may experience. Navigating these hinges

on teachers continuing to build and sustain a rich understanding of the children in their care, as needs can vary considerably from child to child. For example, Goodyear-Brown writes:

There are many elements of the natural world that can be challenging and/or rewarding for the traumatized child. Some children may be more sensitive to changes in temperature, to the sound or feel of a breeze, or to changes from direct sunlight to a shady area. Whether the exposure involves touching a squiggly, slimy earthworm or packing mud into 'clay bombs', play in nature requires children to take risks to experience and enjoy the natural environment<sup>17</sup>.

There are also opportunities to engage with creative practices to support children living with trauma. One example is [art](#) and artistic processes, through which children can take risks and understand boundaries, gain a sense of awareness and control in relation to their emotions, and benefit from soothing creative experiences<sup>18</sup>. Honouring the children's creations and giving them visibility is also key – whether in the centre or school community or in the wider community<sup>19</sup>.

Looking more broadly across children's rights, trauma-informed practice can potentially contribute to enacting [social justice](#). For example, in a review of trauma-informed teaching frameworks, it was identified that the frameworks align to core social justice principles, support awareness of disempowerment and how education settings may perpetuate this, and provide the tools for teachers to reflect and evolve their practices to avoid continuation of disempowerment of students<sup>20</sup>. It is also worth considering the 'conceptual overlap' between trauma and children's rights, as noted by Bargemen and colleagues who write: 'While the language of trauma, itself, is not explicitly captured in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, it is clear that the overarching premise of the Convention identifies children's rights to be free from various types of trauma exposure<sup>21</sup>. Article 19 is identified as one key example as it focuses on the protection of children from traumatising experiences such as violence, abuse, or neglect<sup>22</sup>.

In terms of teachers' and leaders' own wellbeing, it is important to stay attentive to how staff engaged in trauma-informed approaches are coping. For example, there may be risks of increased stress, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma<sup>23</sup>. In writing around burnout and how it may lead to compassion fatigue, Nicholson, Perez and Kurtz write:

When early childhood teachers suffer from compassion fatigue they are at risk of losing their ability to have empathy, compassion, and desire to help the children and families they serve. Compassion fatigue can lead caring professionals to lose sight of the original reasons they entered into their work, to help others, and in the case of early childhood teachers, to love, care for, and support the development of young children and their families.

They step through personal and professional strategies for self-care which teachers can consider, noting that these strategies are individualised<sup>24</sup>. A recent study on the impact of trauma-informed attitudes on teachers and school staff indicated that such attitudes may serve as a protective factor against stress<sup>25</sup>.

It is also essential to remain mindful that research about trauma and trauma-informed practice is ongoing. Remaining attentive to developing insights will help with sustaining a trauma-informed approach. For example, in a recent study<sup>26</sup> which sought to conceptually expand the list of ACEs, it was established that the original ten categories may not fully encompass all childhood adversity. The study also supported intervention or prevention approaches focused on whole-school mental health.

This is a key point for centre and school communities to embrace: trauma-informed practice should not exist in a 'micro' sense or in isolation. Rather, it is best established and sustained as a collective effort by all teachers and leaders that becomes integral to the culture and function of the setting as a whole.

By working together to embrace trauma-informed practices in early childhood education and beyond, all children can be supported to thrive.

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## Recommended further reading

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## Endnotes

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