

NINE THINGS TEACHERS SHOULD KNOW ABOUT TRAUMA

FIONA BEASLEY

Fiona Beasley shares her research into trauma informed practice...

More and more, schools are recognising the need to support both students who have experienced trauma as well as the teachers who work with them every day. Research shows that children who go through tough experiences like abuse, neglect, or family struggles often face challenges in learning, behaviour, and relationships. They may struggle with focus, managing emotions, or getting along with others, and some may develop anxiety, depression, or other mental health concerns. Without the right support, these difficulties can lead to school suspensions or even expulsions.

Being trauma-informed means understanding how these experiences affect students and learning how to create a supportive, safe environment where they can thrive. This article covers ten important things teachers should know about trauma-informed practices to help every student feel understood, valued, and ready to learn.

1. WHAT IS TRAUMA?

The most commonly used definition of trauma is that from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (Trauma and Violence - What Is Trauma and Its Effects?, n.d.) SAMHSA recognises trauma as an event, or set of circumstances, that is experienced by an individual, resulting in physical, emotional and/or life-threatening harm. The event may be an accident, long term illness or natural disaster that results in someone feeling unsafe and unstable. It could be a one-time event, such as a car accident, on an ongoing event, such as prolonged neglect. Ongoing trauma, over a long period of time, creates toxic stress. Chronic or toxic stress, brought on by trauma, is the long term-activation of the body's stress response.

2. HOW PREVALENT IS TRAUMA?

Australian Child Maltreatment Study (Haslam et al., 2023) found more than 2 in five Australians (39.4%) have experienced childhood maltreatment, including physi-

cal abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and exposure to domestic and family violence. The NSW Government's *DCJ Quarterly Statistical Report on Services for Children and Young People – July – September 2024* (NSW Department of Communities and Justice, n.d.) identified:

- A total of 104 687 child and young person concern reports were received. Of these 58.1% met the risk of significant harm (ROSH) threshold.
- A total of 527 children and young people entered Out of Home Care (OOHC). This is an increase of 8.2%.
- As of 30 September 2024, a total of 13 889 children and young people were in OOHC in NSW.
- There were 351 children and young people in High Cost Emergency Arrangements (HCEA) at the end of September 2024.

It is important to note that this data relates to circumstances of harm that have been reported. It does not take into account other events identified as contributing to trauma. We can also make assumptions that these statistics are lower than the real number of children who may be experiencing maltreatment or abuse as a result of under-reporting.

3. WHAT DOES TRAUMA LOOK LIKE IN SCHOOLS

Our brains are developed to help us respond to threat. Children who have experienced trauma, perceive the world as a dangerous place. Their brains are on high alert and may appear to overreact to what may seem to those around them, as unthreatening stimuli, resulting in behaviours that can be characterised as fight, flight, freeze or fawn. These automatic responses can be defined as reacting to a perceived threat through:

- Fight – responding aggressively
- Flight – trying to flee
- Freeze – an inability to move or act

- Fawn – trying to please in order to avoid the threat.

Children who have been exposed to traumatic events resulting in experiencing toxic stress are at far greater risk of difficulties in school. Notably, the impact that trauma can have on brain development, particularly that resulting in toxic stress, leads to cognitive and social-emotional difficulties.

Downey et al. (2013), in the resource developed for the Victorian Child Safety Commissioner identified the most recognisable impacts on education under two intertwining categories.

Impacts on academic performance	Impacts on social relationships
Reduced cognitive capacity	Need for control
Sleep disturbance	Attachment difficulties
Difficulties with memory	Poor peer relationships
Language delays	Unstable living situation

4. SELF-REGULATION CAN BE CHALLENGING FOR STUDENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED TRAUMA

For students who have been through trauma, self-regulation can be especially tough. Their struggles with schoolwork and social interactions are often made worse by difficulties managing their emotions and deep feelings of shame.

Emotional Dysregulation: Hyperarousal vs. Dissociation

Kids dealing with trauma often show emotional dysregulation in one of two ways—hyperarousal or dissociation.

- **Hyperarousal** means being on high alert all the time. These kids may see neutral situations as dangerous, reacting with fear or defensiveness. Even though their bodies are geared up for danger, they're not always good at recognizing real threats, which can lead to risky behaviours. Plus, being in this constant state of alertness makes it incredibly hard to focus or pay attention in class.
- **Dissociation** is the opposite—these kids may seem zoned out, distant, or emotionally unreachable. Sometimes, they might even appear defiant or

oppositional when, in reality, they're just mentally shutting down as a coping mechanism.

The Weight of Shame

For children who have experienced trauma, feelings of shame can be overwhelming. A small mistake or a simple disciplinary action can make them feel like failures or even like they're inherently "bad." This shame can fuel emotional outbursts and make it even harder for them to regulate their emotions, sometimes leading to aggression as a way to cope.

Understanding these challenges is key to helping trauma-affected students navigate school and social situations with the support they need.

5. KIDS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED TRAUMA ARE NOT GOING OUT OF THEIR WAY TO PUSH YOUR BUTTONS

Children who have experienced trauma can develop maladaptive strategies as a means of maintaining personal safety. Dr Ross Greene puts it very simply as, "Kids do well if they can." (2008) He identifies that rather than taking the view that kids do well if they want to, suggesting a lack of motivation, we should take the view that if a kid could do well, they would. Kids who struggle, who are challenging, are lacking the skills required to do so. Dr Greene goes on to say that challenging behaviour is most likely to occur when the expectations being placed on them outweigh the skills they have to respond adaptively.

6. WE DON'T ALWAYS KNOW WHAT IS HAPPENING WHEN KIDS ARE NOT AT SCHOOL.

We don't always know what experiences children bring to school. A child who runs late to school may be met with a reprimand and questions for why they are late. What about the child who rarely seems organised and never has the right equipment or fails to bring back excursion notes on time. Consider the iceberg analogy. We can see the tip of the iceberg, but what is hiding beneath the surface? The child who is reprimanded for being late spent the morning getting siblings ready for school and trying to scrounge together food for their breakfasts and lunches while their parent remained in bed, unable to get up due to the debilitating depression they are experiencing. Rather than reprimanding the student for being late, consider responding with compassion and empa-

thy. This child has managed to get themselves to school despite the challenges they may be facing.

7. BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Understanding the impact that traumatic events can have on the developing brain helps us to understand what children need to heal. Although negative early experiences such as poor attachment have a negative impact on the brain, conversely, relationships can have a protective and reparative impact. The importance of relationships in healing cannot be understated. Whilst therapeutic interventions may be essential, genuine relationships resulting in micro moments of positive regard can be transformational for a child's healing. It is the countless relational experiences that kids experience at school on a daily basis, both intentional and unintentional that have the greatest impact. (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2018; Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010)

“The more healthy relationships a child has, the more likely he will be to recover from trauma and thrive. Relationships are the agents of change, and the most powerful therapy is human love.” (Perry, 2007)

8. USE RESTORATIVE PRACTICES RATHER THAN PUNITIVE DISCIPLINE

Punitive discipline results in kids feeling shame and isolation for making mistakes as well as perpetuating the idea that they are bad. For students who have experienced trauma this can be particularly damaging and potentially re-traumatising. This type of discipline relies on control over care with an over-reliance on compliance, rather than understanding.

Restorative practice promotes a safe school culture and environment by helping to build positive relationships. Restorative practices are not about giving kids a free pass. “It recognises that a variety of factors influence behaviour and seeks to address the underlying influences through empathy, relationship-building, communication, social and emotional learning and finding ways to respectfully hold one another accountable”. (NSW Department of Education Wellbeing, 2025)

A new professional learning course developed in collaboration with leading experts in the field is now available on-demand from the NSW Department of Education. (Wellbeing, 2024)

9. TAKE CARE OF YOUR OWN WELLBEING FIRST

The most important point to remember when working with children who have experienced trauma is the demands of this work. This can take its toll on the wellbeing of teachers in the form of compassion fatigue as a result of working day after day with children who may be aggressive or withdrawn and do not respond as quickly to the usual positive regard shown by teachers. They cannot continue to support the wellbeing of others unless individually and collectively we consider the wellbeing of the teachers themselves.

Downey et al. (2013) suggests three strategies for self-care, being reminded by the three R's: **Reflection, Regulation** and **Relaxation**

Reflection – be realistic about working with students who have experienced trauma as it can be very difficult to like and relate to them. Consider reflecting on their behaviour in light of what you know about trauma and try to understand the behaviour from the perspective of what has happened to them rather than what is wrong with them. Think about what you may need to continue to work and connect with the student. Ensure you have a trusted colleague you can debrief with.

Regulation – Be mindful of how this work may trigger your own dysregulation. Reflect on what it is you need to self-regulate. You cannot support the regulation of students if you are dysregulated. Be aware of your own triggers and the reactions and emotions they may invoke. You have probably heard the quote by L. R. Knost “When little people are overwhelmed by big emotions, it's our job to share our calm, not join their chaos.” We cannot help children learn to self-regulate if we add our emotions to the mix.” (Kansas, 2023).

It is important that there is a culture of safety within your school that means you can tap out when needed, no questions asked. You need to be able to ask for help without judgement. It is not a reflection on your abilities as a teacher, but more how hard this work really is.

Relaxation – just as important as reflection and regulation is being able to relax. Having the time and space to engage in activities or past times that refresh and renew your energy. Ensure that you are engaging with things that are of interest to you, the things that bring you joy. Engage in Yoga, mindfulness, read a book, go for a hike, binge watch a favourite show, get a massage. Whatever

you do, it is what brings you peace and joy.

Most importantly, remember to be patient and forgiving of yourself. Children who have experienced trauma and have disrupted attachment require time to change and being kind to yourself is necessary within a culture of safety and social support in your school.

END NOTE.

This JPL article is based upon Fiona's 2024 Eric Pearson report entitled *Trauma Informed Practice: An Observation of the Elements Required to Sustain Practice*.

Federation members can access this document through the Member Portal :

<https://members.nswtf.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2024/09/24048-Eric-Pearson-report-BEASLEY-FA-digital.pdf>

The NSW Teachers Federation Library has a copy of the report. It can be accessed through the Library's catalogue:

<https://library.nswtf.org.au/libero/WebOpac.cls?VERSION=2&ACTION=DISPLAY&RSN=22694&DATA=TFB&TOKEN=pMHHAdlwi9451&Z=1&SET=1>

REFERENCES

Australian Childhood Foundation. (2018). *Trauma informed practice in schools*. <https://professionals.childhood.org.au/app/uploads/2018/08/ACF325-Making-Space-For-Learning-Book-v4.pdf>

Downey, L., Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services, & Department of Education, Training and Employment. (2013). *Calmer classrooms: A guide to working with traumatised children*. <https://paediatricsonline.files.wordpress.com/2019/07/calm-er-classrooms-guide.pdf>

Greene, R. W. (2008). *Lost at School: Why Our Kids with Behavioral Challenges are Falling Through the Cracks and How We Can Help Them*. <https://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BB18318146>

Kansas, C. C. a. O. (2023, August 21). *When Little People are Overwhelmed by Big Emotions*. Child Care Aware. <https://ks.childcareaware.org/when-little-people-are-overwhelmed-by-big-emotions/>

NSW Department of Communities and Justice. (n.d.). *Quarterly statistical report*. Communities and Justice. <https://dcj.nsw.gov.au/about-us/families-and-communities-statistics/services-for-children-and-young-people/quarterly-statistical-report.html>

Perry, B. D. (2007). *The Boy Who Was Raised As a Dog: And Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook*. https://openlibrary.org/books/OL17210964M/The_boy_who_was_raised_as_a_dog

Trauma and violence - *What is trauma and its effects?* (n.d.). SAMHSA. <https://www.samhsa.gov/mental-health/trauma-violence#:~:text=SAMHSA%20describes%20individual%20trauma%20as%20an%20event%20or,in%3A%20physical%20harm%2C%20emotional%20harm%2C%20and%20for%20life-threatening%20harm.>

Ludy-Dobson, C. R., & Perry, B. D. (2010). The role of healthy relational interactions in buffering the impact of childhood trauma. In Eliana Gil (Ed.), *Working With Children to Heal Interpersonal Trauma: The Power of Play*. https://childandfamily-sa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/The_Role_of_Healthy_Relational_Interactions_Perry.pdf

NSW Department of Education Wellbeing, I. A. (2024, November 25). *Restorative practice*. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/schooling/school-community/attendance-behaviour-and-engagement/behaviour-professional-learning/restorative-practice>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR.

Fiona Beasley began teaching as an Itinerant Support Teacher (Hearing) in 1996 in Mudgee. Since then, she has worked in both mainstream and special education settings in primary schools in rural and remote areas from Broken Hill to the far south coast as a teacher, Assistant Principal and relieving Principal.

She has also worked in and out of corporate roles as a Non-School Based Teacher since 2007. Prior to her current role, as Wellbeing Systems Support Advisor, she worked in the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on Students with Disabilities in Schools (NCCD) team and substantively holds the position of Assistant Principal Learning and Support for the Batemans Bay Network of schools.

Fiona is an experienced presenter of the Department of Education's Trauma Informed Practice for improved learning and wellbeing professional learning.

She completed an Eric Pearson Study Grant report on *Trauma-Informed Practice: An Observation of the Elements Required to Sustain Practice* in 2024.

In addition, she presented her work at the Trauma Aware Education Conference in Brisbane Queensland in 2024 and will undertake QUT's new Microcredential in Trauma Aware Education as part of the first intake in July.

