# History of Trauma-informed Care and Education

Trauma-informed care started in medicine, as an approach to patient care that takes trauma into account when diagnosing and treating individuals. It had its genesis in patient care in the 1970s, when the physical and mental traumas experienced by Vietnam War vets necessitated it. Out of the study and treatment of this population came the diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and a burgeoning awareness that trauma, especially multiple traumas, can affect the way in which the brain, the nervous system, and the body function or malfunction.

As awareness of the many kinds of trauma, and its effects on both the body and the brain developed, trauma-informed care became more widely studied, funded, and folded into the practice of medicine. In 2001, when the U.S. Congress and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHA) established the Donald J. Cohen National Child Traumatic Stress Initiative, and the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, the national eye turned to learning more about trauma-informed care in pediatrics and in education. This occurred not long after a landmark study in 1997 (Anda and Felitti), which surveyed over 17,000 adults about their exposure to 10 categories of abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction during their childhood. The study is known as the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Survey. The study took two years; using the survey, physical exams, and ongoing tracking of the adults’ health, it showed strong correlations between childhood trauma and poor health outcomes decades later.

## Education Can Respond to Childhood Trauma

It is now commonly known that trauma experienced in childhood can have pervasive, long-lasting negative effects; and so trauma-informed care is applied now in a wide range of settings that serve the public good, including Child Protective Services, treatment facilities, criminal justice institutions, and public schools. In education, the healing effects of trauma-informed practice can have significant impact on improving student health, well-being, and cognitive growth. Trauma is nearly universal; most people are familiar with the sudden and sometimes terrifying experience of tragedy, loss, and crime. Educators are in a unique position to help children process and overcome challenges associated with trauma.

Education institutions have increasingly become responsive to events in the wider world. As part of their responsiveness, educators have found that trauma recovery practices enable them to help children and their families recover, even after unthinkable tragedies and disasters. A key example occurred in 2005, when Hurricane Katrina made landfall in New Orleans, LA. More than a million people had no choice but to abandon their lives and relocate to new cities such as Houston. As a result, professionals in places like Houston began to use practices intended to help newcomers overcome the fear and confusion that Katrina inserted into their lives. Studying the history of Katrina’s effects on Houston and its public institutions would be one way to get a better understanding of the development and use of trauma-informed educational frameworks.

Situations in which children must “start over” are frequent. Not all of them are associated with huge and disruptive events like Katrina. Divorce, family illness, parental job relocations, and many other circumstances all might contribute to the need to “start over.” For many children, “starting over” is something they experience multiple times across their school years.

Events that require children to “start over” range from destabilizing to disastrous. When the events are serious and sustained, the trauma that children experience can inhibit their physical, social-emotional, and/or cognitive growth. Finding ways to help students start growing again following a destabilizing or even disastrous event may require a range of supports.

Among these supports, education has an important role to play. Because of its focus on growth and development, education already provides many of the tools children need to become re-engaged and healthy: a caring environment that builds trust, responsible adults who provide advice and guidance, intellectual tools for thinking about and making sense of experience, and opportunities to develop self-confidence through the mastery of new knowledge and skills. In a sense, academic instruction may be the most powerful therapeutic tool educators can use to help children who have experienced trauma restore stability in their lives and start to move forward in productive ways.

These ideas are evident in one recent definition of trauma-informed education:

In a trauma-informed school, the adults in the school community are prepared to recognize and respond to those who have been impacted by traumatic stress. Those adults include administrators, teachers, staff, parents, and law enforcement. In addition, students are provided with clear expectations and communication strategies to guide them through stressful situations. The goal is to not only provide tools to cope with extreme situations but to create an underlying culture of respect and support.

(<https://traumaawareschools.org/traumaInSchools>)

On average, 25% of the students in a school have experienced significant trauma. This does not mean that 25% of students need to be taught “how to cope” or “how to learn.” But it does mean that helping students handle all sorts of life challenges in productive ways is an important responsibility of every school community. As experienced educators know, this is how it’s always been. Trauma-informed education simply provides educators—as well as the communities they serve—with some new tools for doing so.

## Relevant Resources

<https://www.iowawatch.org/2018/06/15/a-short-history-of-trauma-informed-care/>

<https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/trauma-informed-care-what-it-is-and-why-its-important-2018101613562>

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/aug/25/new-orleans-west-houston-hurricane-katrina>

<https://traumaawareschools.org/traumaInSchools>