

# Understanding Trauma and Young Children



*Trauma is an event or a series of events that have a negative effect on a child. There are a number of ways parents, teachers, and caregivers can support children who have or may still be experiencing trauma.*



## Exposure to trauma is common

Potentially traumatic experiences can include, but are not limited to, abuse and neglect, natural disasters, and exposure to violence in the community. Up to 50 percent of preschool-aged children in the United States have experienced a potentially traumatic event. Children with disabilities are more likely to experience trauma.



## Trauma impacts learning

Experiencing trauma can impact a child's brain. They may feel unsafe or be constantly in fight-or-flight mode, making it hard to learn. In the classroom, it may seem as if children are being defiant or hyperactive. They may have difficulty paying attention. They may struggle with executive functioning skills such as planning, focusing, and remembering. In reality, these behaviors could be a response to trauma.



## Trauma-informed care in the classroom

Trauma-informed care is based on an understanding of the effects of trauma and includes efforts to lessen those effects on children. This can be done through classroom culture, policies, and practices. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) has identified four main components of trauma-informed care:

- Realizing the impact of trauma;
- Recognizing the signs and symptoms of trauma;
- Using knowledge about trauma when creating policies, procedures, and practices; and
- Resisting future trauma



## Supporting children who have experienced trauma

Teachers and schools play an important role in supporting children who have experienced trauma. Children who have experienced trauma may struggle with uncertainty and not knowing what's going to happen next. Because of this, the classroom should be a safe and predictable place for all children. Here are some suggestions for teachers:

- Maintain a consistent schedule and routines
- Use visual aids to help children better understand the schedule and expectations
- Provide warnings before a transition or a change in the typical schedule
- Avoid practices that may make children feel unsafe, such as isolating them

It's also important to build secure relationships with children based on trust and care. This can be hard for children who have experienced trauma because they may have a hard time trusting adults. Finally, focus on social-emotional learning in the classroom. Teach lessons on identifying feelings and on how to calm down when you're upset.

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Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



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