

# Trauma-Informed Schools and Social-Emotional Learning

Children face many circumstances and life experiences that can affect their success in school. Unfortunately, these can include adverse childhood experiences that can traumatize our children. Trauma and toxic stress can hinder a child’s development, relationships, behavior and learning, making school a difficult experience. Social-emotional learning is one of four learning domains outlined in Ohio’s strategic plan for education, [Each Child, Our Future](#), that schools can focus on to challenge, prepare and empower students for success by giving them tools to become resilient, lifelong learners. The social-emotional learning domain helps school teams address the needs of the “whole child,” who stands at [the plan’s center](#), and acknowledge toxic stress and trauma as aspects of a child’s life that bear on his or her education.

## What is Trauma?

“Experts explain that trauma is not an event itself, but rather a response to one or more overwhelmingly stressful events where one’s ability to cope is dramatically undermined” (Traumasensitiveschools.org, 2019). Trauma can result from a single incident (acute trauma) or from multiple incidents over time (complex trauma). A range of experiences that can result in trauma include, but are not limited to:

- Accidents;
- Child abuse and neglect;
- Sexual assault;
- Natural disasters;
- Domestic violence;
- Community violence;
- Harassment and intimidation;
- Bullying;
- Medical illness;
- Hostage situations;
- Social and environmental factors;
- Parent or caregiver death;
- Inconsistent parenting due to mental health, alcohol or drug issues;
- War;
- Terrorism and other man-made disasters; and
- Immigration and refugee experiences.

## The Impact of Trauma

Trauma can impact children in many ways, and their responses to traumatic incidents can vary. Circumstances of an occurrence, such as when, how, where, how often and the responses of others can influence a child’s response. Prolonged exposure to trauma, such as on-going abuse, chronic neglect, or repeated exposures to violence, without the buffer of safe adult relationships can result in toxic stress. Children may experience symptoms of trauma and toxic stress related to brain development, learning and behavior — all of which affect a child’s school experience and academic success.

## Trauma Informed Schools

Recognizing the impact trauma has on individuals, many schools are becoming trauma-informed buildings. These schools intentionally create policies and practices that are sensitive to the needs of traumatized students and work to create learning environments where everyone feels safe and supported. Trauma-informed schools implement practices that:

- Build relationships between students and staff;
- Create consistent, safe environments; and
- Provide a range of interventions that address anxiety and other trauma responses.

## Social-Emotional Learning and Trauma

Social-emotional learning supports the efforts of trauma-informed schools. Relationship skills are fundamental to social-emotional learning, and healthy relationships have proven to benefit children who have experienced trauma. By incorporating social-emotional learning activities into the classroom, teachers help students build the skills they need to form and maintain those healthy relationships.

Children who have experienced trauma have strong, difficult emotions. Many do not have the vocabularies to identify and express the emotions they feel. Social-emotional learning activities help build children's understanding of their own emotions by teaching vocabulary in the classroom to express them. Offering examples in everyday classroom activities, teachers can help students connect their feelings, thoughts and behaviors. This can improve their abilities to identify their own feelings or recognize and relate to the feelings of others.

Social-emotional learning also can help children learn to manage the strong emotions they are experiencing. Educators can teach and help students implement self-calming techniques such as deep breathing, progressive relaxation, repetitive movement and journaling in the classroom. Teachers who implement these activities throughout the day help children who are exposed to trauma move from stress responses to calm states that allow them to attend to and retain new information. Jacob Ham, director of the Center for Child Trauma and Resilience at Mount Sinai, describes this process as moving from "survival brain" to "learning brain" in the video [Understanding Trauma: Learning Brain vs. Survival Brain](#).

Not every child will experience trauma, but all children face challenges. Social-emotional learning teaches children the skills they need to build strong relationships, understand their emotions and manage strong emotions in a safe, healthy way. These skills benefit all students but especially those who have experienced trauma.

For more information on trauma and trauma-informed schools, visit the Ohio Department of Education's [trauma-informed schools webpage](#). For more information on Ohio's K-12 Social and Emotional Learning Standards and resources, visit the Department's [social and emotional learning standards webpage](#).