

# Trauma-informed Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

This document is part of a full toolkit for educators. Find this toolkit and other educator resources on our website by visiting [www.transformingeducation.org](http://www.transformingeducation.org).

**Trauma-informed SEL** is an approach to fostering youths' social-emotional development that seeks to create a safe and reliable environment where students who have experienced adversities and trauma feel supported, are welcome to explore their strengths and identities, exercise their agency, can develop meaningful, positive relationships with adults and peers in their learning community, and have access to the mental health supports they need.

Educators using trauma-informed SEL practices recognize all their students' strengths, assets, and contributions, and leverage opportunities to infuse positive experiences in the classroom to support every child's ability to reach their own potential. Educators also work to develop and model their own social-emotional skills, use self-care practices that allow them to be supportive adults for their students, and actively engage mental health supports as their need for them arises.



## Key Trauma-informed SEL Practices



### Create predictable routines.

Help children who have experienced trauma adapt to transitions a little easier so that they feel safe and ready to learn.



### Build strong & supportive relationships.

Strong relationships can provide the responsiveness, scaffolding, and protection that can support children who are feeling the effects of traumatic events.



### Empower students' agency.

Help your students feel seen, heard, and empowered. Be responsive to their needs. Find ways to support their goals and efforts to build their self-efficacy and exercise their agency.



### Support the development of self-regulation skills.

Actively building executive functioning and self-regulation skills can help youth cope with, adapt to, and offset effects of adversities. Practice and develop your own self-regulation. Acknowledge students' capacity and resilience, and celebrate how resourceful they are.



### Provide opportunities to explore individual and community identities.

Help students strengthen and explore their own identities and explore the perspectives of others through various activities that promote agency and civic engagement. Encourage participation in local community traditions.

## More about ACEs and Trauma.

Trauma is an experience of one or more overwhelmingly stressful adverse events (or ACEs) where one’s ability to cope is dramatically undermined. The event can be witnessed or experienced directly and can cause the person to have an extreme psychological and/or physiological response due to feeling terror and/or perceived helplessness.

Symptoms of trauma vary and can present differently at different times. Below are a few common examples by age group.

Elementary School Children	Middle School Youth	High School Youth
Anxiety, fear, and worry about safety of self and others	Anxiety, fear, and worry about safety of self and others	Anxiety, fear, and worry about safety of self and others
Unusually whiny, irritable, moody	Develop eating disorders or self-harming behaviors	Discussion of events and reviewing of details
Changes in behavior (e.g., increase in activity level, withdrawal from others, angry outbursts or aggression)	Changes in behaviors (e.g., irritability, decreased attention, increased activity level, withdrawal)	Changes in behavior (e.g., withdrawal, irritability with friends, teachers, events, angry outbursts)
Changes in school performance (e.g., concentration, attention to instructions)	Feeling depressed or alone	Changes in academic performance
Feelings of guilt or shame	Worries about recurrence or consequences of violence	Decreased concentration
Easily startled or hypervigilance	Engaging in risky behavior, such as abuse of alcohol or drugs.	Increase in impulsivity, risk-taking behavior
Difficulty sleeping	Absenteeism	Discomfort with feelings (such as troubling thoughts of revenge)
Statements and questions about death or dying	Over- or underreaction to loud noises, physical contact, sudden movement	Increased use of alcohol and other drugs

Sources:  
 SAMHSA (n.d.) [Understanding childhood trauma](#); Safe Place to Learn (n.d.) [Common Symptoms of Trauma by School Age Group](#)

## Important Considerations

- Children of different age levels can present with a range of symptoms and expressions of trauma.
- Some symptoms are more common in some age groups than others, but they can overlap across groups.
- Children and youth might present with these behaviors for other reasons not related to a traumatic event (for example, irritability and inattention because they are sick). It is always important to find out more information if you suspect that a student is responding to trauma.
- Children are not always aware of “trauma reminders” or triggers - events, situations, places, sensations, and even people that they consciously or unconsciously connect to a traumatic event. If a child’s symptoms are the result of trauma, they can experience “trauma reminders” that may cause them to behave a certain way with no obvious trigger in the environment.

## Additional Resources to Explore

### [National Child Traumatic Stress Network’s Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators](#)

This resource provides school administrators, teachers, staff, and concerned parents with basic information about working with children who have experienced trauma.

### [The National Child Traumatic Stress Initiative’s “Understanding Child Trauma”](#)

This infographic provides quick facts about the prevalence of child trauma, signs of traumatic stress, and how to help support children experiencing traumatic stress.

### [Turnaround for Children’s Vision for School and Student Success](#)

This Framework for Transformational Change speaks to the role of strong school leadership and shared ownership and responsibility to support all students—especially those who have experienced significant adversity.

### [Colorín Colorado’s Using a Strengths-Based Approach to Support Students Living with Trauma, Violence, and Chronic Stress](#)

Adopting a strengths-based approach allows educators to draw from their students' internal strengths and capacities and supports the academic and social-emotional growth of all students. This article offers more information and strategies for integrating a strengths-based approach.