

Trauma as a Contextual Factor in School Responder Model Implementation

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The goal of this three-part series is to emphasize the importance of incorporating a trauma-informed perspective into the design, implementation, and evaluation of school responder models (SRMs). Youth who have been exposed to trauma, those with mental health conditions, and those with substance use disorders are more likely to be subject to exclusionary discipline policies in school. Exclusionary discipline contributes to these youth having higher rates of juvenile court system involvement. The SRM is a school-based, behavioral health response model that seeks to disrupt unnecessary suspension, expulsion, and arrest for students, particularly those with unidentified, unmet, or undermet behavioral health needs. This tip sheet provides an overview of trauma to help educators understand its prevalence and how it can manifest in student behaviors. This tip sheet provides a summary of the importance of trauma-informed approaches that can improve responses to challenging behaviors and facilitate improved relationships and connection both inside and outside of the school environment.

The research on trauma's impact on learning and behavior summarized in the introductory tip sheet in this series has significant implications for at least two contextual considerations that undergird the SRM approach:

- 1. Understanding and explaining challenging behaviors and**
- 2. Promoting individual and community connectedness.**

First, ***an understanding of trauma can provide school professionals with a new perspective for explaining the behaviors they observe.*** Teachers and school personnel understand the important role they play in guiding students toward mastering reading or math. They understand students do not walk in on the first day of kindergarten with the skills they need to read or multiply. However, do school staff apply that same teaching and learning paradigm when it comes to guiding students in mastering new social, emotional, and behavioral skills?

Although the primary goal of school is academic skills development, teachers and other school personnel also play a critical role in the development of nonacademic skills and competencies. Frequently, teachers and other school personnel require training, coaching, professional development, technical assistance, and, sometimes, a fundamental change in mindset in order to fulfill that role.

A foundational underpinning of the SRM framework is that school personnel can better address student misbehavior by making different decisions before, during, and after a behavioral incident. Decades of research suggests that people make nearly automatic judgments and causal attributions in social interactions and that racial and ethnic biases influence decision-making in matters of school discipline.¹ Addressing the adult responses to youth behaviors in the SRM framework aims to ensure that students with behavioral health conditions are not met with exclusionary discipline for actions better addressed through treatment and services.

In the midst of a challenging behavioral situation, school personnel must rely on their judgment to make multiple decisions, some that are nearly automatic and some that are made more deliberately in the minutes, hours, or days that follow. Those decisions forge pathways that have real consequences for both students and schools. In some instances, preconceived notions of students' inherent "badness" or "goodness" can profoundly impact the short- and long-term decisions that are made in response to a challenging behavior.

Trauma practitioners describe a shift in mindset that occurs as individuals learn more about the impact of trauma on functioning—learning that can fundamentally change the questions they ask and how they explain student behavior.^{ii,iii} For example, questions might turn from "What's wrong with this student?" to either "What happened to this student?" or even "What is right with this student?" That change in mindset can, in turn, help school personnel respond differently to challenging behaviors, as trauma-informed perspectives help shift their approach from a punitive model to a model grounded in accountability, restoration, and support.

Second, ***an understanding of trauma prompts schools to invest more intentionally in individual and community connectedness.*** The human capital that is accumulated when adults invest in knowing and understanding their students at a deep, individualized level can pay significant dividends when that student later exhibits a behavioral challenge. Some school resource officers have used the SRM process to—as they have put it—emphasize the "resource" and de-emphasize the "officer" in their title, which enhances their interactions with students. A similarly inspired mindset has the potential to benefit anyone who works closely with students.

Authentic relationship building and investment in creating a positive school climate often take place well before a behavioral challenge occurs. This preexisting climate helps create a relational context in which adults responding to a student's behaviors can exhibit calming, de-escalating words and actions. This may be even more important when working with students who have experienced trauma because it may be challenging for them to form and maintain trusting connections and relationships with others, and they can have difficulties with emotional and behavioral regulation. A trauma-informed preventive approach—one in which students who have experienced trauma are provided with services and supports to address their needs—may carry the potential to help students avoid behavioral incidents and exclusionary discipline altogether. In addition, a trauma-informed school environment is one that is supportive of all students and staff through universal, targeted, and indicated strategies for acknowledging and responding to trauma school-wide.

Some students and parents feel that, despite schools being cornerstone institutions in their community, teachers and administrators may too frequently be unaware of critical events and circumstances affecting the community. For example, community violence can have profound impacts on students, particularly because witnessing or directly experiencing interpersonal or community violence are among the most common forms of trauma exposure.^{iv,v} School personnel who have well-established, structural connections to community leaders are more aware of what is going on in the community and will be better prepared to support students who may be suffering from the effects of adverse community experiences and community trauma.

Furthermore, school personnel with this level of connection to the community are also more aware of the significant strengths and resources that exist in that community and can be a more informed and supportive presence in students' lives. Creating ingrained and consistent mechanisms for enhancing awareness and sensitivity to the challenges and pressures within a community is critical to an SRM.

Understanding the prevalence and impacts of trauma allows educators to deepen their understanding of the root causes of challenging in-school behaviors. By identifying potential trauma exposure, the school responder model framework provides the pathway for students to receive necessary supports and services. The framework offers a therapeutic pathway for students with behavioral health conditions to disrupt unnecessary exclusionary discipline. By connecting with students and their families and the broader community, schools implementing school responder models can enhance their understanding of the trauma-related risk and protective factors that exist to best support students.

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Endnotes

- i. Cheryl Staats, *Implicit Racial Bias and School Discipline Disparities* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, 2014), <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/implicit-bias-training/resources/ki-ib-argument-piece03.pdf>.
- ii. Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, *Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services* (Rockville, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration: 2014), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207201/>.
- iii. Jennifer Parker, et al., “The Impact of Trauma-Based Training on Educators.” *Journal of Child and Adolescent Trauma* 13, (2019): 217-227.
- iv. “Children and Trauma” *American Psychological Association*, last modified 2011, <https://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/children-trauma-update>.
- v. David Finkelhor, et al., “Prevalence of Childhood Exposure to Violence, Crime, and Abuse: Results From the National Survey of Children’s Exposure to Violence” *JAMA Pediatrics* 169, no. 8 (2015): 746-54.