



**PREVENTING SERIOUS  
BEHAVIOR ISSUES IN SCHOOLS:  
TRAUMA-INFORMED STRATEGIES**



## PREVENTING SERIOUS BEHAVIOR ISSUES IN SCHOOLS: TRAUMA-INFORMED STRATEGIES

### WHY IT MATTERS

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A growing body of research documents the behavioral problems that children and youth in foster care experience – issues that impact their prospects for academic success – in the form of disciplinary infractions and other offenses.<sup>1</sup> Children and youth in foster care experience school suspensions and expulsions at higher rates than non-foster care peers putting them at even greater risk for school failure.<sup>2</sup> Failure to address their needs leads to behavioral problems at school. Being expelled or suspended greatly increases the chance that a student won't graduate high school. Furthermore, the impacts of childhood maltreatment that remain unaddressed can impact mental health and manifest in behavioral problems that go into adulthood.<sup>3</sup>

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In addressing behavioral problems with students in foster care, schools need to understand the impact of trauma on their lives. Research suggests that between half and two-thirds of all children are exposed to one or more adverse childhood experiences that can

be trauma-inducing. Not surprisingly, children in foster care experience trauma at disproportionate rates.<sup>4</sup> A literature review examined the relationship between childhood maltreatment

and educational outcomes and found that children with maltreatment histories often experience impairments in both their academic performance including special education, grade retention and lower grades and their mental well-being. Researchers found that these impairments were more likely to be identified among

maltreated children in foster care. When maltreatment histories are not addressed adequately, there is a greater likelihood that a child will express anxiety, low mood, aggression, deficits in social skills and poor interpersonal relationships. These behaviors are often detrimental to their learning and potentially disruptive in a classroom setting. Many schools are not adequately equipped to address the impacts of trauma on learning although there is a promising movement of schools becoming better “trauma-informed”.<sup>5</sup>

Ensuring that schools are trauma-informed is a collaborative process that involves participation on behalf of parents, teachers, administrators, and staff.

report from the Office of the Child Advocate found that one school district using this model experienced dramatic improvement on their statewide assessment tests, with an 11-percentage point gain in math and a 14-percentage point gain in English language arts. Notably, suspensions went down to the same level of other general students in the 2015–2016 school year compared with previous years.

Caring adults that foster a sense of belonging at school have been shown to be an effective model in helping youth create a positive student identity and reducing behavior challenges.<sup>7</sup> Researchers in New Zealand interviewed youth who had not completed

*A teacher who is trauma-informed doesn't ask, “What is **wrong** with you?”  
But rather, they ask, “What **happened** to you?”*

One such effort in Delaware between the courts, child welfare agency, and schools, is being undertaken to train teachers and staff in trauma-informed practices and strategies using the *Compassionate Schools Model*.<sup>6</sup> Compassionate Schools benefit all students who attend but focus on students chronically exposed to stress and trauma in their lives. These schools create compassionate classrooms and foster caring attitudes of their school staff. The goal is to keep students engaged and learning by creating and supporting a healthy climate and culture within the school where all students can learn. A 2016 Delaware

high school about what would have fostered a sense of belonging at their school. Based on the youth accounts, they identified five orientations to practice that made the most difference to a youth's ability to stay at school: perseverance, adaptability, relationships, time and honesty. Researchers found that when school professionals adopted these orientations, students were better able to interact with school professionals over how support and resources would be made available, increasing the likelihood that youth would benefit from them.<sup>8</sup>

## ADVOCATES IN ACTION

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### ACTIONS

- **Learn if children and youth you advocate for are having discipline issues at school.** What is being done to address these issues? How are these issues impacting their ability to learn? What is their history of suspensions and expulsions? How have these been addressed in the past?
- **Ask the child or youth their feelings and ideas about potential discipline issues and what they think can be done to help support their prevention?** Many children and youth will be able to communicate why they believe they get “in trouble” at school. Talk with them about what would be helpful for them to do better in school. Can they identify some teachers or other school staff that they trust or feel a connection with?
- **Connect students in foster care with caring adults.** Because of their past traumas, children or youth may find it difficult to form trusting relationships, and they often lack a “network of caring adults” engaged with their education. Schools can help smooth these transitions by designating a single point of contact and training about the needs and opportunities available for youth in care. This point of contact can be a resource for communication and collaboration with the child’s team and raise concerns before they become bigger disciplinary actions.
- **Advocate for culturally sensitive and trauma-informed school discipline training and practices.** Encourage schools to use evidence-based prevention strategies, social and emotional learning opportunities, and regular training for all school personnel on how to engage students in positive behavior. School discipline should employ “clear, developmentally appropriate, and proportional consequences” that help students “learn from their mistakes, improve their behavior, and achieve academically.”<sup>9</sup>
- **Learn whether there are School Resource Officers (SROs) or police are within schools,** and if so, ask if they have been trained on child and adolescent development, age-appropriate responses, disability concerns, and conflict resolution and de-escalation techniques. Such training will benefit youth in care who have disproportionately high rates of referral to the juvenile justice system. These officers should be familiarized with the specific challenges and needs of youth in foster care and trauma-informed responses.
- **Ensure that if a child or youth is suspended or expelled from school they receive due process.** Learn about the school district policies for suspensions and expulsions and make sure that the child or youth is not unfairly punished. Children and youth of color, particularly African-American males, are far more likely to receive harsher school disciplinary action. Recognize if there is bias occurring by comparing what happens to other students for similar offenses. If the student is on an IEP and suspended or expelled there should be a hearing to determine if the behavior resulting in the disciplinary action was related to their disability. If yes, then there will be different parameters put in place. For a child with disabilities, the education decision-maker is a vital part of ensuring that a



child is not disciplined for manifestations of his or her disability, and that the child's procedural rights are protected.<sup>10</sup>

- **Advocate for in school suspension versus out of school suspension or expulsion.** Explain how out of school time only exacerbates the academic

challenges for children and youth in foster care. Again, encourage school staff and administration to be trained in trauma-informed strategies and programs. Show how it can support not just children and youth in foster care, but any child or youth who has been exposed to trauma.

## BRIGHT SPOT

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### *TRAUMA INFORMED CARE INITIATIVE CASA SHAW, (SOMERSET, HUNTERDON, AND WARREN), NEW JERSEY*

Three and half years ago, CASA SHaW executive director Tracey Heisler met Dr. Melissa Sadin of the Attachment and Trauma Network (ATN), who was interested in becoming a volunteer. It soon became clear that Dr. Sadin's responsibilities were too extensive for the volunteer role, but she had other resources to offer to the program. Thus began a partnership between CASA SHaW and Dr. Sadin to provide pre- and in-service training to advocates on the impacts of trauma on child development. Realizing that this information was so important to not only advocates, but to other adults who work with children and youth impacted by abuse and neglect, including teachers, administrators, law enforcement officers, guidance counselors and many more: the "Trauma Informed Care Initiative" was born.

Volunteers from many organizations, including CASA SHaW, came together to form an organization called "Resilient Youth Somerset" with the goal of providing this cutting-edge information about the impacts of trauma on children's developing brains to those on the front lines

when children are in crisis. Many of these volunteers have a history with CASA, including a retired family court judge, former advocates and board members, and current CASA staff. In addition to all CASA staff and volunteers being trained on this model, so too have hundreds of teachers, law enforcement officers, and other stakeholders in this tri-county community.

This initiative was recently recognized by the Attachment and Trauma Network (ATN) which offers trauma-informed care support, information and guidance to schools, foster parents and adoptive parents. The "Trauma Informed Care" training provides information on physiological changes in the brain caused by repeated exposure to abuse and neglect, the role of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on children, and offers tools on how respond to children and youth impacted by trauma. The training is adapted from resources and supports provided from the "Helping Traumatized Children Learn" training materials developed by Dr. Sadin.<sup>11</sup> In addition to CASA SHaW staff, other partners in the Resilient Youth Somerset initiative include staff from the Office of Youth Services, Safe Harbor, Ducks & Lions (a trauma training group), Somerville Public School system, the Children's Hope initiative, Family Support, and Middle Earth, a

mentoring organization. Because the trainings are done by volunteers all focused on helping traumatized children, there are no fees charged.

Tracey Heisler, CASA SHaW's executive director, provides training to school faculty in elementary, middle and high schools across the programs' jurisdiction as well as law enforcement officers. Trainings are either an hour long for an overview of the research or can last three hours long, which includes the overview and a viewing and debriefing of the documentary, *Paper Tigers*, the story of how one high school became

for children struggling academically. Tutors are CASA SHaW advocates with educational backgrounds. While not assigned to the child or youth as their "regular" CASA, in addition to tutoring, these advocates may attend IEP meetings, review prior approaches, track grades and disciplinary referrals, and so on. Over the last four years, approximately 30 children have received tutoring services. Of these 30 children, all have successfully transitioned to the next grade level – no one was retained. There was even one student who was reading at a third grade reading level at 13-years-old who got an 89 in Physics at 16-years-old

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trauma-informed and impacted the well-being of their students.<sup>12</sup> The training provides information on different types of trauma, the definition of being "trauma-informed," ACEs including the different types, the impacts of ACEs on health, the prevalence and how they impact a child's development. Additional information is provided on the impacts of abuse and neglect on brain development and behaviors. Learning how to respond to "trauma" triggered reactions is covered along with the signs of what to look for. Strategies for helping children and youth gain resiliency and alternative ways to respond to behaviors that are non-punitive are also addressed. Finally, participants in these trainings have an opportunity to learn about their local CASA program, the role of an advocate, and how to learn more about becoming an advocate themselves. Since 2017, 29 groups have received this training with 326 attendees, January–April 2018.

Recognizing that many youth in foster care have educational deficits due to their trauma experiences, CASA SHaW also provides a free tutoring program

with the support of her tutor. Another student, who had twice been retained, was brought up to grade level and entered high school as a freshman with her peers instead of going to seventh grade at 14-years-old. The trajectory of her school experience has irrevocably been changed for the better with the help of her tutor. Additionally, private funders have donated to a fund that provides clothing, toys, extracurricular activity fees and supplies, and other things that a child or youth needs to feel more confident in school.

As communities become better educated about the impacts of trauma and how to promote resiliency, all children affected by trauma benefit. This program offers this important education to the very people who work on behalf of the best interests of children every day. It's never been said that a child or youth can have too many supportive adults in their lives and this program offers a collaborative continuum of support that benefits everyone.

For more information: [training@casaforchildren.org](mailto:training@casaforchildren.org)

## SELECTED RESOURCES

Name	Description
<p><a href="#"><u>Delaware Department of Education, Trauma Informed Compassionate Schools Model</u></a><sup>13</sup></p>	<p>This web site link houses all of the materials, agendas, and resources that Delaware has utilized to create trauma-informed compassionate schools around the state. Additionally, information on outcomes related to discipline for students in foster care are reported.</p>
<p><a href="#"><u>Legal Center on Foster Care and Education, School Discipline and Youth in Foster Care: New Federal Guidance from the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice Can Help</u></a><sup>14</sup></p>	<p>In January 2014, the Departments of Justice and Education issued new Guidance designed to assist states, districts, and schools in developing and implementing policies, practices, and strategies that improve school climate and comply with federal law. This fact sheet addresses frequently asked questions as they pertain to students in foster care and school discipline issues.</p>
<p><a href="#"><u>National Child Traumatic Stress Network, Resources for School Personnel</u></a><sup>15</sup></p>	<p>NCTSN has created a <i>Child Trauma Toolkit</i> for educators providing school administrators, teachers, staff, and concerned parents with basic information about working with traumatized children in the school system.</p>
<p><a href="#"><u>National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities</u></a><sup>16</sup></p>	<p>The National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (NICHCY) is a national information and referral center that provides information on disabilities and disability-related issues to families, educators, and other professionals. This is a go-to resource for questions related to disciplinary actions for students on IEPs.</p>

Name	Description
<a href="#">Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)</a> <sup>17</sup>	<p>PBIS is a framework or approach for assisting school personnel in adopting and organizing evidence-based behavioral interventions into an integrated continuum that enhances academic and social behavior outcomes for all students.</p>
<a href="#">State of Washington, Office of Public Schools, <i>Compassionate Schools: The Heart of Teaching and Learning</i></a> <sup>18</sup>	<p>The <i>Compassionate Schools Initiative</i> within Learning and Teaching Support provides training, guidance, referral, and technical assistance to schools wishing to adopt a <i>Compassionate Schools Infrastructure</i>. <i>Compassionate Schools</i> benefit all students who attend but focus on students chronically exposed to stress and trauma in their lives. These schools create compassionate classrooms and foster compassionate attitudes of their school staff. The goal is to keep students engaged and learning by creating and supporting a healthy climate and culture within the school where all students can learn.</p>



## ENDNOTES

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- 1 Smithgall, C., Jarpe-Ratner, E. & Walker, L. (2010). *Looking back, moving forward: Using integrated assessments to examine the educational experiences of children entering foster care.*
- 2 Castrechini, S. (2009). *Educational outcomes in court-dependent youth in San Mateo County. Issue Brief Court Dependent Youth.* Stanford, CA: John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities.
- 3 Romano, E.L., Babschishin, L., Marquis, R. & Frechette, S. (2015). Childhood maltreatment and educational outcomes. *Trauma, Violence & Abuse*, 16 (4), 418-437.
- 4 Salazar, A.M., Keller, T.E., Gowen, L.K., & Courtney, M.E. (2013). Trauma exposure and PTSD among older adolescents in foster care. *Social psychiatry and psychiatric epidemiology*, 48 (4), 545-551.
- 5 Romano, et. al. (2015).
- 6 The Compassionate Schools Model  
[www.compassionschools.org](http://www.compassionschools.org)
- 7 Sanders, J., & Munford, R. (2016). Fostering a sense of belonging at school- five orientations to practice that assist vulnerable youth to create a positive student identity. *School Psychology International*, 37 (2), 155-171.
- 8 Ibid
- 9 Cole, S.F., Eisner, A., Gregory, M., & Ristuccia, J. (2013). *Helping Traumatized Children Learn: Creating and Advocating for Trauma-Sensitive Schools.* Boston, MA: Massachusetts Advocates for Children.
- 10 See Issue Brief on "Meeting the needs of children with disabilities" for more information.
- 11 <https://traumasensitiveschools.org/get-involved/creating-trauma-sensitive-schools/>
- 12 To learn more, see <https://kplrfilms.co/paper-tigers/>
- 13 <https://www.doe.k12.de.us/Page/3356>
- 14 [http://www.fostercareandeducation.org/portals/0/dmx/2014%5C06%5Cfile\\_20140623\\_160924\\_bGK\\_0.pdf](http://www.fostercareandeducation.org/portals/0/dmx/2014%5C06%5Cfile_20140623_160924_bGK_0.pdf)
- 15 <http://www.nctsn.org/resources/audiences/school-personnel>
- 16 <https://www.nidcd.nih.gov/directory/national-dissemination-center-children-disabilities-nichcy>
- 17 <https://www.pbis.org/school/swpbis-for-beginners/pbis-faqs>
- 18 <http://www.k12.wa.us/CompassionateSchools/Resources.aspx>