

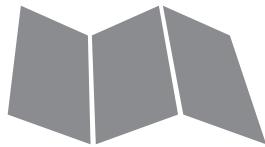
CHAPTER 1

Trauma and Connection

Relationships matter. The first week of school, Tim was back at his same antics after finishing last year relatively well behaved. His refusal to listen to Mr. Thomas, his seventh-grade teacher, seemed more of a calling than happenstance. He started most days listless, with his head on the desk, and ended with a blaze of fury directed at any unfortunate soul trying to cajole him into behaving—except one: Ms. Rose, his sixth-grade teacher. To the astonishment of many, last year she had discovered the cheat code for not only inspiring Tim to behave but also to complete assignments. On the precipice of a suspension after several trips to the office, Tim met with Ms. Rose in Principal Stevens’s office. He hadn’t seen her since the end of sixth grade. Tim’s eyes watered in response to her first question, “What happened this summer that has you so upset?” This was the first time anybody asked.

HOW TO READ THIS CHAPTER

Uncovering the impact of trauma on students’ lives is a balance between creating emotionally safe connections and holding students accountable for behavior. This chapter gives you a foundation for creating this balance with a trauma-informed approach. The story of Tim will appear throughout this chapter, illustrating how to use practical tools. We’ll also discuss the key research findings behind those tools. By the end of this chapter, you will be able to define trauma, understand its impact on students, and take action using a trauma-informed mindset.



Chapter Roadmap

Below find the chapter roadmap and familiarize yourself with the highlights of our journey together.

1. Learn about the importance of connection for trauma-exposed students.
2. Discover how attunement can prompt healthier stress responses.
3. Your *Reflection Moment* will challenge you to consider how you experienced emotionally safe relationships as a student.
4. Learn how to address the invisible wounds of trauma and its impact on the brain with the 3 E's for defining trauma and 4 R's for creating a trauma-informed school system.
5. Build skills to recognize and respond to trauma reminders (triggers) and **early warning signs**.
6. Engage *Discussion Questions* with colleagues about creating psychologically safe spaces for students to share about their lives.
7. Start cultivating a trauma-informed mindset by understanding how your expectations impact how you interpret students' behaviors.
8. Practice **reframing** students' behaviors to have a fuller picture of the reasons behind their behavior and how trauma may be connected to it.
9. Infuse trauma-informed connections schoolwide by learning the six principles of trauma-informed care. Discover why this chapter focuses on the principle of safety.
10. Conclude with *Implementation Activities* that provide guidance for next steps. Three checklists are provided for educators in leadership, in the classroom, and outside the classroom.

Before diving into the rest of the chapter, take a moment to review the glossary terms you'll encounter. Let's play a game to get us started. Write down your definition for each of these glossary terms before reading the chapter. At the end of the chapter, return to the definition you wrote down and give yourself one point for each definition you got right (or close enough). Be honest. We're on the honor system.

1. Attunement	6. Reframe (Reframing)
2. Early Warning Signs	7. Regulation
3. Grit	8. Survival Brain
4. Learning Brain	9. Trauma Reminders (Triggers)
5. Psychological Safety	10. Traumatic Stress Reactions

We'll do this for each chapter. See how many points you have at the end of the book. Each time you read this book, your score should go up!

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONNECTION WITH STUDENTS

The connection educators make with students profoundly shapes their academic experience (Quinn, 2017; Roorda et al., 2011). This is particularly the case when students feel stressed and unsafe. When stress or threat is present, our bodies go into overdrive to protect us with a biologically hardwired fight, flight, freeze, or fawn response. Even when stressful life experiences happen outside of school, the stress response can manifest in the classroom, leading to misunderstandings and conflict. Student stress responses are often interpreted by teachers and administrators as behavioral problems that need to be punished. At the same time, students may distrust teacher motivations for behavioral redirection, associating educators with other authority figures who failed to protect them from stressful life experiences. However, our most powerful tool to prevent these types of misunderstandings and maximize student potential comes from the quality of our relationships.

The Brain's Stress Responses

To fully unpack how our relationships with students prevent misunderstandings, it is helpful to examine how the brain governs the fight (aggressively confronting threat), flight (running from threat), freeze (becoming immobile and unable to act against threat), or fawn (trying to please someone or act submissive to avoid conflict) stress response to achieve our most urgent life goal: survival. I learned this pretty quickly working with adolescents at Rikers Island Jail in New York City. Ironically, the lesson came after leaving one night. To travel back and forth to “The Island,” there was a single bridge that Rikers buses crossed to transport people. After crossing the bridge back into the city, I caught the bus in an area we lovingly termed “the hood.” One night after being delayed at Rikers due to a buildingwide lockdown (see *Shawshank Redemption*), I made it to the bus stop after dark and so did a pair of footsteps I heard picking up the pace behind me. Naturally, my alarm for danger started to go off and my body automatically went into action.

What is often less well known about fight, flight, freeze, or fawn is how automatic these responses are—especially when exposed to danger since childhood. Before I was consciously aware of the footsteps behind me, my muscles tensed, my heart raced, my gaze narrowed, and I prepared to become Rocky Balboa if need be. In short, the **survival brain** assumed control of my body and redirected mental resources from the **learning brain** to attend to the immediate threat of the footsteps stalking me. The survival brain—primarily comprising the amygdala, hippocampus, and hypothalamus—represents the part of the brain responsible for processing threat and provoking the fight, flight, freeze, or fawn response to ensure survival. In contrast, the learning brain—generally identified as the frontal lobe and prefrontal cortex—is the portion of the brain elevating our awareness to see the big picture and prompting decisions that are generally more regulated. Emotional **regulation**, primarily housed in the learning brain, means students can identify intense emotions and skillfully respond in stressful situations. When your student decides to move

their seat rather than screaming at a classmate, that's being regulated. This skill is learned through emotionally safe relationships.

Emotionally safe relationships are built by bolstering **psychological safety** and building **attunement**—the feeling of being emotionally heard and understood by others. Psychological safety—an individual's belief that they can manage stress or connect with someone who can support stress management—generally requires approaches grounded in social-emotional supports aligned with a student's specific needs (Bondy et al., 2007; Larson et al., 2018). The quickest route to uncovering these needs is through learning more about the student and their specific stress response triggers. When students believe their needs are heard and understood by educators, a level of connectedness is achieved that opens the door to a potentially healthier stress response: tend and befriend (Taylor et al., 2000).

Using Attunement to Prompt Healthier Stress Responses

Tend and befriend is a less well-known stress response that is prompted by experiences of attunement. Few studies better illustrate the importance of adults being emotionally responsive to children than the *Still-Face Experiment* (Brazelton et al., 1975; Weinberg & Tronick, 1996). Ed Tronick and his colleagues at University of Massachusetts Boston designed one of the most compelling situations to illustrate the importance of the relationship between caregiver and child. They placed a mother and infant in a room together and asked the mother to playfully interact with her baby, leading to connection between the two. Then the mother is asked to stop all facial expressions and show the baby a "still face." Without fail, babies become intensely distressed by the still-faced Mom and take every measure to regain connection. The babies point, scream, become physically aggressive, all in an attempt to reconnect. When the mother is told to begin playing with the baby again (quickly, to avoid any lasting harm) the baby immediately reengages, but the lesson of the experiment is clear: Disconnection is painfully stressful, but reconnection is always possible. In essence, tending and befriending at the moment of duress effectively reduces stress without initiating a fight, flight, freeze, or fawn response. Even in relationships where trust is not yet present, recognizing that the stress of a situation arises from your student's disconnection from emotional safety (tending) opens the door to students working with you to deal with their stress in a productive way (befriending).

Connect, disconnect, reconnect is the natural relational pattern of life. It's fueled by a single ingredient in our most important relationships: **attunement**. Attunement allows us to be responsive to someone else's emotional needs. Responsivity communicates "I see what you need" and signals the intent to address this need, even if that response is unwanted. While this type of attunement comes naturally when we have an attachment to a student, it is easy to miss opportunities for attunement when we have negative feelings about a student. For example, let's say your favorite student throws a pencil at another student. You tell her she has to miss recess but say, "I know you are upset that you can't have recess, but you need to learn that you can't throw anything at classmates." This communicates that you understand how the student feels but must discipline her so she better understands how to

connect appropriately with her classmates. In the same scenario, a student you don't know as well—particularly one who may be considered more challenging or less likable—might simply hear, "No recess for you!" When you do not have an attachment to the student, it is easier to enact discipline without using attunement to position the relationship around reconnection. It's through reconnection that we help students to trust that our intent is in their best interest, even if they don't agree with our methods. That trust helps students like Tim share the life stories that illuminate the true drivers of their behavior.

REFLECTION MOMENT

Reimagining a more attuned school with educators who are responsive to students' emotional needs begins with you revisiting your journey to find attuned relationships throughout your life. Think about an adult who made you feel heard, accepted, and seen when you were in school. Consider the following questions about this person and your experiences with them:

1. What was this person's tone of voice and nonverbal behavior when interacting with you?
2. How did this person discuss difficult topics with you?
3. What did this person help you learn about yourself?
4. In what ways did this person prompt you to reveal your most authentic self (your full self, without hiding important parts of who you are)?
5. How did this person build your sense of psychological safety (belief that you could handle stress or reach out to someone who could help get your needs met)?
6. Which of this person's behaviors and ways of connecting do you currently use or could you replicate to create attuned relationships in your school?

INVISIBLE WOUNDS BEHIND BAD BEHAVIORS

Tim's summer had been harder than usual. At age 11, Tim had seen enough verbal barbs between his estranged parents to predict the volatility that ensued when they shared a room for more than 5 minutes. The school knew Mom received sole-custody of Tim and his 6-year-old sister, Amy, after a tumultuous divorce a couple of years ago that was rumored to include physical altercations between his parents. After the divorce, Dad remarried and regained the trust of the courts. Tim began visiting his dad three or four times a month and quickly forged a connection with his new stepmother, Caroline. Unlike both his parents, Caroline understood Tim's behavior was more about trying to connect than purposefully annoy or hurt people. His playful hitting, sheepish isolation, and even angry outbursts consistently received a firm, but warm and loving response from Caroline that so starkly contrasted with both his dad's and his mom's explosive screaming and occasional spanking that Caroline quickly captured Tim's heart. The school was unaware of this, because Mom refused to allow Caroline or his father to connect with Tim outside of scattered weekend and summer

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visits. Whether due to Mom's disdain for Caroline or her pattern of heavy drinking when stressed, she had failed to inform the school about what Tim shared with Ms. Rose in that tense office meeting: Caroline was killed by a drunk driver over the summer.

The pain Tim experienced the day he learned about Caroline's death was devastating but not singular. The trauma was likely amplified by his previous experiences of witnessing domestic violence at home and enduring the threat of physical abuse. Each of these incidents meet the SAMHSA 3 E's criteria for trauma: an *event* that a person *experiences* as harmful that has a short or long-term *effect* (Lathan et al., 2021; see Table 1.1). Childhood trauma exposure is not an anomaly. It's a public health concern, with prevalence rates ranging from 31–70% for youth 18 years old and younger (Copeland et al., 2007; Lewis et al., 2019). Students can be exposed to a wide range of traumatic events.

Given that these events can be experienced directly, witnessed, or heard about, childhood trauma exposure can fly below the radar for educators not versed in the various types of traumatic events. In an epidemiological study reviewing childhood trauma exposure rates among nationally representative samples in the United States, researchers found 8–12% of youth experienced sexual assault, 9–19% had been subject to physical abuse, 20–25% encountered a natural disaster or man-made accident, 1 youth in 5 lost a family member to homicide, and 38–70% witnessed community violence (Saunders & Adams, 2014). Attuning to students' needs after trauma exposure does not require knowing the nature of the traumatic event, but it is helpful to be aware of the traumatic events students could potentially encounter and to understand how this affects them in school.

A common effect in the aftermath of trauma is a highly activated stress response. Situations that once felt safe now feel threatening. The caring act of an adult or gentle teasing from a classmate may elicit an intense emotional response that appears disproportionate to the situation. From the purview of a trauma-exposed student, their stress response is doing what makes sense: protecting from threat that feels similar to the danger of trauma. As in Tim's story, this can result in challenges in the classroom that are misinterpreted as "bad behavior."

Given the litany of disruptive behaviors that educators encounter throughout the school year, it can be difficult to distinguish between behavior aimed at disruption and behavior as a cry for help. The challenge with behaviors borne out of trauma is that they often represent both. Also known as **traumatic stress reactions**, these behaviors include intrusive thoughts continuously reminding the person of their trauma, difficulty sustaining relationships with others, negative mood changes, unhealthy thought patterns such as self-blame, or avoidance of stressful situations with substance use (see the handout The 3 E's of Trauma (Event, Experience, Effect)¹) These behavioral responses disrupt important aspects of a person's life, including remaining connected to school, feeling safe at home, maintaining a job, and building healthy relationships.

¹ Traumatic stress reactions often represent symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). While all the stress reactions discussed in this book may not technically meet criteria for PTSD, it is important to be aware of the continuum of impact of trauma. It can range from general life disruption and emotional injury to a clinical diagnosis requiring significant supports to manage.

TABLE 1.1. The 3 E's of Trauma (Event, Experience, Effect)

Event	Common types of events 1. Sexual abuse or assault 2. Emotional abuse/psychological maltreatment 3. Neglect 4. Physical abuse or assault 5. Serious accident or illness/medical procedure 6. Witness to domestic violence 7. Victim or witness to community violence 8. School violence 9. Natural or manmade disaster 10. Forced displacement 11. War, terrorism, political violence 12. Traumatic grief or separation
Experience	Important questions to consider about experience Below are some experience-related factors to monitor if you believe someone was impacted by a traumatic event. They are phrased as questions that you can use to investigate how someone experienced the trauma. 1. Did the traumatic event feel like a betrayal? 2. Is this something the person believed was on purpose or an accident? 3. Has this happened before and is there the belief it will happen again? 4. How safe does the person feel now that this traumatic event happened? 5. Does the person feel capable of healing from this traumatic event? 6. Can the person draw on past skills for dealing with adversity now?
Effects	Key effects of trauma 1. Avoidance. A person may begin to avoid anything that reminds them of a traumatic event. 2. Intensified vigilance, alertness, and reactivity to others. 3. Changes in mood and thought patterns. 4. Mental and emotional distancing from stressful experiences. 5. Reexperiencing traumatic event.

Note. An extended version of this table is available online. It provides examples and definitions.

Responding to Trauma with Attunement

Effectively responding to students' traumatic stress reactions hinges upon realizing trauma has a role in their behavior and recognizing how **trauma reminders** activate the survival brain. SAMHSA illustrates the importance of this perspective through the 4 R's (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2014): realize, recognize, respond, and resist retraumatization. When adults *realize* the widespread impact of trauma on students' lives, it creates a pathway to *recognizing* the situations, people, and actions of others that remind students of traumatic experiences and trigger traumatic stress reactions. Ultimately, this trauma-informed approach leads to *responding* with attunement to behaviors that first appear to be "bad behavior," *resisting retraumatization* of the student in the process. The 4 R's are what led Ms. Rose to ask Tim what happened this summer instead of simply interpreting his behavior as disruptive (see Table 1.2 and 4 R's Empower Your Students at www.guilford.com/pickens-materials). It is a response that organically restores a sense of psychological safety to students by showing a desire to understand their stories. The trust built through this approach gives educators who work to understand students' stories the opportunity to connect with them and calm their survival brain.

Understanding students' stories requires understanding that their behavior comes from a hurt place and that their survival brain is trying to protect them from future hurt. The student's knowledge that a raised voice comes just before being hit by a parent, or their realization that the promise to return often results in abandonment are sometimes the student's only safeguard against impending danger. Trauma, however, can cause distortions

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and make everyday experiences look like signs of danger. For example, you firmly tell a student to sit down and he becomes irate and believes you were yelling at him. The natural reaction for a frustrated and bewildered educator is to instill respect by making clear the rules of the class and communicate minimal tolerance for this behavior. With a trauma-informed approach, this can happen, but attunement must lead the way.

Clear rules and consequences must be processed by the learning brain. Paying attention to important details in a situation, controlling the impulse to smack someone, delaying gratification, or solving complex problems are executive functioning skills, all of which are housed in the learning brain. What better way to test these skills than with a couple of marshmallows? Stanford University's classic marshmallow experiment tests the power of self-control. Kids are seated in a room with one marshmallow and told that if they wait until the researcher comes back to eat the marshmallow, they'll be rewarded with a second marshmallow (Mischel, 1974). Some kids distracted themselves by refusing to look directly at the marshmallow, others sniffed, licked, or even caressed the marshmallow, while others simply ate the marshmallow before the researcher could even sit down in his observational suite. Years later, the kids who resisted eating the first marshmallow had better grades, higher SAT (standardized college admission test) scores, and were more likely to graduate, go to college, and sustain employment (Mischel et al., 1989).

TABLE 1.2. 4 R's to Create a Trauma-Informed School System

SAMHSA's 4 R's	Key actions	Tim's story
Realize the widespread impact of trauma.	Schools can implement schoolwide screening tools to assess the community needs and identify the percentage of students that have been exposed to traumatic or stressful events.	School knew about the change in Tim's family structure due to the custody agreement, leading to a significant change in both his home environment(s) and parenting figures (addition of new stepmother).
Recognize how it is impacting the student.	Trauma-informed schools require <i>all</i> school staff to have foundational skills to identify common reactions to traumatic stress. This means professional development training opportunities for all school staff and ensuring there are key members that can provide ongoing consultation to the team.	While the school may not have known explicit details of everything Tim had experienced, an awareness that such significant home environment changes would constitute a stressful or traumatic experience can help the school better <i>recognize</i> how Tim may be impacted. The school would benefit from being <i>attuned</i> to Tim's behaviors (e.g., is he acting out more or having a hard time focusing in class?). Ultimately, what is Tim doing that seems to show he is simply trying to <i>survive</i> ?
Respond in a way to allow students to feel heard.	Adopting a trauma-informed approach to responding to students' behaviors is critical schoolwide. Emphasize the importance of responding first with compassion and attunement to a student's behavior to create a space that feels safe for students to share their stories.	Ms. Rose exemplified this perfectly. While she may not have known all the details of Tim's life, she asked the question, "What happened this summer that has you so upset?" Her response was one that was not pathologizing; rather, it was an opportunity for Tim to share his story. Creating a space for students to feel heard and given an opportunity to share their story is critical.
Resist retraumatization.	Schools benefit by demonstrating their commitment to holding themselves accountable. <i>Partnering</i> with students and families means <i>including</i> them in developing the plan for the healing process.	The school can inquire from Tim and his family about what he needs to feel supported at school. How can the school feel like a stable environment? Is there a space Tim can go to when he is reminded or triggered? How can the school help identify what potential triggers or "pain points" for him are?

A recent twist on this classic study revealed that there is more to self-control than simply willpower (Kidd et al., 2013; Moffett et al., 2020). To test whether the reliability of the marshmallow benefactor (the researcher) influenced how long kids would wait, researchers primed one group of kids with a reliable adult and another group with an unreliable adult. In the reliable group, before the experiment, the adult told the kids he was going to get them an activity, such as art supplies to color, and quickly return, which he did. For the unreliable group, the same promise was made, but instead the researcher returned with a lousy excuse and nothing for the children. Then the marshmallow study commenced. Children in the unreliable group waited for the second marshmallow a significantly shorter amount of time as compared to the reliable group. Suddenly, the marshmallow study became a reflection of the power of trusting relationships as much as self-control.

The learning brain works best when the survival brain is calm, and the survival brain is calm when it feels safe and trusts those providing safety. A teacher spouting rules and consequences doesn't communicate safety to a student in a moment of distress. Instead, the survival brain goes deeper into survival mode. Does this mean rules and consequences are dismissed? No, but they should be delayed to prioritize creating a safe connection—particularly for students who have experienced the unreliability and danger of trauma at the hands of adults they care about.

THROUGH MY EYES

This truth came into focus one afternoon as I was welcomed to a detention center school-yard by a tall 14-year-old girl, whom I'd never met before, with a loud unfriendly greeting, "Why the f\$&% are you here?" My natural inclination was to remind her who she was speaking to and let her know in very strong language that she was not to speak to me like that again. However, as a trauma-informed educator, I understood that her response was not about me. I probably reminded her of something from her past—something invisible that I couldn't see that was triggered by my presence. Mentally, she was back in that past moment of trauma. With the help of a coworker who knew her, we took her aside and let her know my first priority was ensuring her own and everyone else's safety. Once her survival brain calmed, we spoke to her learning brain by reviewing better ways to communicate with a new person who felt threatening. We also reminded her of the consequences for talking to adults that way and disciplined her for her actions with a temporary loss of recreation privileges—implicitly acknowledging that trauma is not an excuse for behavior but an explanation for it. The conversation ended with one of the most potent strategies to calm the survival brain and build the muscles of the learning brain: a more trusting relationship.

Recognizing Trauma Reminders and Early Warning Signs

The path to reach a more trusting relationship with a student whose survival brain is constantly activated presents obstacles that may feel as insurmountable as being asked not to eat a marshmallow. Yet the key to building any trusting relationship is the same: Help the

person feel seen. Learning trauma reminders and early warning signs is one of the most effective strategies for *realizing* and *recognizing* the impact of trauma on students' lives in the classroom and beyond. **Trauma reminders**, ranging from tone of voice to time of day, are precursors to students feeling unsafe and preparing to self-protect. **Early warning signs**, such as students cursing under their breath, pacing, or putting their head on the desk, can signal upcoming explosive traumatic stress reactions, such as fighting another student, self-harming, or complete withdrawal and isolation (see Table 1.3).

A primary goal for an educator's trauma-informed response is to proactively help students regulate and remain connected to school when trauma reminders and early warning signs arise. Translating trauma-informed care strategies into effective educator practices is a blend of science and art (Thomas et al., 2019). When effectively integrated, these practices reduce symptoms of trauma exposure for students (Allison & Ferreira, 2017; Jaycox et al., 2009), have the potential to improve academic outcomes (Saltzman et al., 2001), and increase educators' understanding of drivers of behaviors related to trauma exposure (Crosby, 2015; Levendosky & Buttenheim, 2001). Each of these outcomes is dependent on educators recognizing trauma reminders, early warning signs, and school systems facilitating opportunities to respond or refer students for more intensive supports.

When these trauma reminders and early warning signs are addressed with simple, non-defensive questions or statements such as, "What made you say that?" or "Let's talk outside, just the two of us" (see Table 1.3 for more examples), educators communicate to students that they see them and are aiming to keep all students safe. Cultivating a school climate that proactively bolsters psychological safety, particularly for students who have experienced trauma, often involves directly asking what triggered a student's behavior and building in time to figure out healthy coping strategies. This may result in integrating breaks into the class day that are timed to reduce exposure to trauma reminders, developing calming zones in the classroom to help students regulate overwhelming feelings, or simply inviting students to share more about their stories. This collaborative approach requires a trauma-informed lens that begins with trusting relationships with adults who can see the whole student.

When you successfully integrate these trauma-informed lessons into the school day, students can more accurately see when danger is present and engage healthy coping strategies. Obviously, I survived my walk to the bus from Riker's Island to write another day. I wasn't saved by a vigilante, Jiu Jitsu skills, or even a bus arriving. I didn't need saving. After about a minute, the footsteps hurried past me—as if I was planning to turn around and rob *him*! I completely misread the situation. After this realization, my brain started processing the information around me with a fresh perspective. The shadows were less menacing and the sounds less threatening. My body calmed, my thoughts stopped racing, and my learning brain took the lead. I could see clearly where I was, but more importantly, I could more clearly see who *I* was: a person not too different from our students. My stress response, just like that of our students, can protect me when danger is present and prompt self-protective behavior when I misread a situation as threatening. In that moment, I was acutely aware that in order to truly attune to the invisible needs of our students in a trauma-informed manner, I needed to look within and remember just how similar I am to our students.

TABLE 1.3. Recognizing Trauma Reminders (Triggers) and Early Warning Signs

Trauma reminders (triggers)	Early warning signs	Example phrases for responding
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being touched • Time of year connected with trauma • Particular time of day signaling return to situation that reminds of trauma (i.e., end of school day when returning home) • Being blamed • Being isolated • Specific person or certain type of person similar to perpetrator of trauma • Tone of voice or yelling • Seeing others fight or hearing about violent acts • Loud noise • Being forced to talk with someone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restlessness • Pacing • Shortness of breath • Being very quiet • Feeling tight in the chest • Sweating • Nausea • Agitation • Cursing • Withdrawing from playgroups and friends • Competing more for the attention of parents and teachers • Being unwilling to leave home • Being less interested in schoolwork • Becoming aggressive • Having added conflict with peers or parents • Having difficulty concentrating • Becoming withdrawn • Resisting authority • Eating or sleeping too much or too little • Pulling away from people and things • Having low or no energy • Having unexplained aches and pains, such as constant stomachaches or headaches • Feeling helpless or hopeless • Becoming disruptive or aggressive at home or in the classroom • Experimenting with high-risk behaviors such as underage drinking or prescription drug misuse and abuse • Worrying a lot of the time; feeling guilty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I noticed you seem distracted today. What’s different about today?” • “What is making completing this work difficult right now?” • “You can take a minute to think, and I will come back to check on you.” [Helpful after asking a question.] • “I can see you’re upset. Let’s talk outside, just the two of us.” • “What made you say that?” • “You are seen and my goal is to keep everyone safe, including you.” • “You seem more [name behavior] than usual today. I’m concerned. Can you share a little about what is going on to make you [name behavior] today?” • “Sometimes we have physical pain when we have strong feelings. What happened recently that you think may give you strong feelings right now?” [Use this when physical symptoms are noticed.]

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Addressing the invisible wounds of trauma by better understanding students' stories is a powerful reimagination of responding to "bad behavior." Connecting with colleagues about how they learn about students' stories is important. Share your ideas and take notes about how others work to understand students' lived experience.

1. How do staff at your school currently identify students' trauma reminders (triggers) and early warning signs (e.g., staff have grade-level meetings to share about student behavior; individualized education plan meetings with families explore the impact of trauma; staff simply ask students what is stressful and how they respond to that stress)?
2. What opportunities are currently available to learn about students' stories and how trauma may impact their school behavior?
3. How does the school attempt to help students feel psychologically safe and promote skills of the learning brain?
4. What are ways to make it easier for students to share about their reminders (triggers) and early warning signs? This can either be in or outside of the classroom.

BUILDING A TRAUMA-INFORMED MINDSET INTO THE SCHOOL CULTURE

As Tim poured out his pain to Ms. Rose in the office, every new revelation of rejection, loss, and anger sparked memories for Mr. Thomas and Principal Stevens. For Mr. Thomas, Tim's shame at feeling he was the reason for his parents' separation felt like his own mother's abandonment as a child. It also wasn't a far cry from the more recent feelings of personal failure that he felt since his divorce. Principal Stevens, whose father died unexpectedly decades earlier, so deeply related to the rage that Tim expressed toward anyone who dared to say "it will be okay" that he felt close to tears and had to resist leaving the room. Ms. Rose's patient listening and compassionate gaze continued to soften Tim and create the safety he needed to share more emotional confessions. Slowly, the notion of Tim as a "bad kid" faded from their minds and all anyone could see was a child in pain. This was not what they had expected. They realized it was time to rethink everything.

The Power of Educator Expectations

Expectations create our roadmap for navigating the world, shaping our connections with ourselves and others. The power of expectations lies in their galvanizing ability. They give us confidence that we can predict the future. Whether these predictions are based on empirical data, life experiences, or opinions that skew toward bias, there is always the risk that expectations incorrectly predict who a person is and what will happen next. Failure to assess whether personal expectations align with reality can lead to the type of surprise Principal Stevens and Mr. Thomas faced. Trauma-informed practices can equip educators

to avoid such surprises by shifting expectations for students—even when managing the most difficult school behaviors.

Without the context of students' life experiences, we as educators can easily assume something is wrong with students who refuse to turn in assignments or constantly find themselves in arguments and fights with peers. The expectation that something is wrong implies students are the sole reason for their behavior. Educator expectations that account

Educator expectations that account for the possibility of stress and trauma as an explanation shift internal dialogue from "What's wrong with this student" to "What happened to this student?"

for the possibility of stress and trauma as an explanation shift internal dialogue from "What's wrong with this student" to "What happened to this student?" This trauma-informed mindset shift will lead to an array of explanations about student behavior. Each potential explanation opens a new avenue to connect with students through attuned actions that can improve their academic and social-emotional lives.

One of the first explanations for student behavior that may arise when asking "what happened to this student?" is me. You. Us. Before the trauma-informed care movement, school systems were growing increasingly aware of the impact of educator expectations on students' behavior in school. It became so apparent in the 1970s that Los Angeles commissioned a study to deconstruct how teacher expectations impact student achievement, the Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement (TESA) study (Kerman et al., 1980; Gottfredson et al., 1995). Los Angeles Unified School District had a problem: the gap between the achievers and nonachievers kept widening. The new programs to boost school achievement were promising but failed to provide the robust improvement that school leadership hoped for. The search for a solution led to a curious question: How does the *way* teachers connect with students influence their achievement? Maybe it's not just *what* the teacher does, but *how* the teacher does it. Observing hundreds of teachers who were above average at achieving classwide revealed a common style: These teachers strongly believed their students would achieve and had measurable actions to back these beliefs. Researchers identified 15 common behaviors these educators consistently engaged that went beyond verbalizing their belief in students' ability to achieve. Handout 1.1 provides a brief explanation of each of the 15 behaviors and a self-assessment you can use to evaluate your current use of these practices.

In the 50-plus years since launching the TESA study, schools have consistently provided evidence for the power of educator expectations in creating a classroom infused with psychological safety (Flanagan et al., 2020; de Boer et al., 2018). These changes might sound simple, but they are substantial because of their capacity to help students feel welcome and valued regardless of the stress or trauma they've experienced outside of the classroom. Developing a school climate that reflects these expectations, particularly for the most behaviorally challenged students, requires more than a few educators shifting their perspectives. School systems supporting policies, processes, and practices that empower educators to engage this shifted perspective contribute to a school culture that transforms expectations into trauma-informed actions, in turn cultivating an integral educator trait: compassion.

Compassion begins with noticing the pain of others and continues as an action to alleviate that pain (Dutton et al., 2014; Goetz et al., 2010). We may struggle to show compassion

if our expectations fail to account for the pain another is experiencing. Becoming a trauma-informed school system involves creating a culture where you feel comfortable seeking explanations for students' behaviors and, more importantly, you are prepared to take trauma-informed actions that recognize the underlying reason for behaviors interfering with a student's academic potential. In other words, you believe their pain without minimizing or denying it—then you act on that belief. The compassionate connections that grow from educators expecting to understand students before redirecting them lays the foundation for a trauma-informed school system.

This transition to consider what happened to a student before redirecting their behavior is not easy. Mental and practical barriers abound. If my school embraces this mindset, are we absolving students of responsibility for their behavior? Classrooms are filled with students, and there is not enough time to dig into each one's background and get through the lesson. Even if I believe trauma is not an excuse for behavior but an explanation for it, does that explanation practically change my classroom? These are valid concerns. The simple answer would proclaim trauma-informed actions as the formula every educator seeks for crafting the perfectly behaved student. The honest answer is more complex, because it depends on us and on our school systems.

The compassionate connections that grow from educators expecting to understand students before redirecting them lays the foundation for a trauma-informed school system.

First, we must understand the mind's tendency to commit the fundamental attribution error: Other people's challenging behaviors can be explained by their inherent traits, while our personal challenging behaviors are seen as a result of situational factors outside our control. Without an awareness of this tendency and others like it, shifting toward a trauma-informed mindset meets with unconscious barriers that undermine building compassionate student relationships. The answer also depends on the trade-offs we can tolerate between relationship-building paths to academic success and more traditional, task-oriented pathways to achievement. It depends on whether your school system mistakenly views achieving trauma-informed mindsets and actions as the result of a standardized curriculum that provides every step for implementation or, more accurately, understands them as muscles that are built over time by consistently engaging a set of guiding principles schoolwide. Balancing the complexity of building trauma-informed mindsets and actions into the school culture begins with managing our expectations about the journey there.

Reframing Expectations toward Student Resilience with Principles for Trauma-Informed Care

The remainder of this book maps a route for educators and school systems to navigate the complexity of these legitimate anxieties. To unpack these complexities more fully, let's dive deeper into an often-overlooked by-product of trauma exposure: resilience. Seeing beyond the pain of trauma and into the beauty of resilience generated from surviving life's most tragic moments requires building on the trauma-informed mental shift of "What happened to this student?" by adding "What's right with this student?" When you assume something

happened to a student that explains their behavior, your next steps are more likely to involve support. When also assuming the student brings inherent strengths to the most challenging situations, your next steps will more likely include collaborating with them. Trauma-informed collaboration ensures behavioral accountability for the student while prompting educators to redirect behavior in a way that builds on student strengths and moves them closer to their social-emotional and academic potential. These types of relationships begin with educator expectations accounting for students' ingenuity, bravery, and will to persevere in the face of difficult life circumstances.

Trauma-informed collaboration ensures behavioral accountability for the student while prompting educators to redirect behavior in a way that builds on student strengths and moves them closer to their social-emotional and academic potential.

Expectation shifts represent a scientifically validated skill that most use without realizing it: reframing (Beck et al., 2005; Ellis, 2010). In the context of improving our connection with others, **reframing** (or **reframe**) involves (1) expanding how we see someone else to include more positive or optimistic interpretations of their behavior, or (2), at minimum, developing a more accurate understanding of their behavioral intent (see Figure 1.1 and Handout 1.2). While individual educator reframes are important, school system policies and processes encouraging the trauma-informed mindset give

educators permission to collectively design a reimagined school culture. As our journey in the following chapters will reveal, a reimagined school culture is grounded in compassionate relationships and supported by school systems that are guided by principles recognizing and responding to the pain and resilience of students. To prepare you for the expedition ahead, let's explore how the six principles of trauma-informed care can begin to provide clarity about implementing trauma-informed practices without ignoring the hurdles for making it work in the real world. The six principles of trauma-informed care outlined by SAMHSA provide guidance for a trauma-informed approach in schools (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Table 1.4 offers a brief explanation of how schools can engage in each principle; and Figure 1.2 shows how to embed the principles with the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) Model and the multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) framework. These principles act as a compass for both educators and school systems implementing trauma-informed practices. A trauma-informed approach in action is less a prescriptive set of steps and more an array of techniques integrated into each interaction, decision, and action. The six principles refocus educators and school systems when it is difficult to decipher whether a policy, process, or practice is trauma-informed. They prompt you to ask targeted questions and assess how closely aligned your behavior is with building a compassionate school culture driven by a trauma-informed approach.

Faced with a student who refused to remove his hat in class, a teacher quickly learned how important integrating these principles into the classroom can be. After a couple of requests to remove the hat, she realized that this situation could escalate quickly and derail the entire class. At that pivotal crossroads, she decided to take him aside and ask a question that countered her initial disciplinary instinct: "Why is this hat so important?" After some awkward moments, the student revealed that he was recently placed in foster care and

the hat was his only possession connecting him with his mother. This revelation instantly changed the teacher's perspective from "bad kid" to "hurt kid."

Let's look at how the educator allowed this shift to happen. Instead of reactively punishing the student for the hat, the teacher effectively engaged several trauma-informed principles. By speaking with him privately and learning the impetus behind his hat refusal, she created a space of psychological safety and empowered him to express his need without reactivating his survival brain or traumatic stress reactions. The conversation progressed to explore how they could protect his hat during the school day while abiding by school rules. The dialogue exemplified the collaboration that can occur when trustworthiness and transparency provide the foundation for an attuned relationship during a distressing moment. She appreciated the strength of the student to communicate his need to remain connected with his mother and his ability to use the hat as the conduit for this connection. Ultimately, they settled on placing his hat in a cabinet he chose. Crisis averted. A student fully seen.

Applying these principles is a daily exercise in recognizing trauma reminders and early warning signs followed by trauma-informed responses tailored to fit into your school's culture. These principles are more seamlessly integrated into the school culture when educators train to have a trauma-informed mindset and school systems implement systemic structures to support trauma-informed responses. Successive chapters delve into each of the six principles of trauma-informed care. You'll receive guidance for how to recognize the impact of trauma and recommendations for your school system to create structures empowering educators to respond with trauma-informed actions. The first principle, safety, is foundational for each of the remaining five principles and is the focus of this chapter. Promoting psychological safety in your school and emotionally safe relationships with students creates the trust necessary for students to reveal their whole selves. Educating the whole child requires understanding what motivates a student, how a student is academically derailed by experiences inside and outside the classroom, and the strategies that can reengage a student in school when they're off-track. This depth of understanding may feel unattainable when faced with the demands of lesson planning, grading papers, and simply reaching daily curriculum benchmarks. Yet educators and school systems that reframe these challenges as an opportunity to meet classroom demands through relationship-oriented activities open the school culture to trauma-informed connections.

Infusing Trauma-Informed Connections Schoolwide with Connection Sessions

Do you see yourself in your students? I thought about this after surviving the menacing footsteps that eventually sped past me following the prison lockdown. The same stress response that pumped my body with cortisol and inspiration to brawl is constantly activated in students who persevere through life's most grim circumstances. Remembering the brief moment of fear I endured makes it difficult to miss the strength students must summon to attend school after experiencing truly threatening life events. Seeing perseverance instead of problematic student behavior is a reframe for classroom behavior that becomes easier when we see ourselves in our students. Principal Stevens and Mr. Thomas's change

Reframe Game is an exercise to practice expanding your perspective about student behaviors that may initially appear disruptive, problematic, or challenging. It helps you practice exploring additional explanations for student behavior. These additional explanations are the “reframes” and give you options for responding to student behavior. Using the challenging behavior in the left column, consider what your initial reaction may be without a reframe, identify examples of reframes and new ways you can respond (response options) based on reframes. Engaging this process as a guide, begin reframing student behavior that may be traumatic stress reactions or appear simply as “bad behavior.” Recreate this exercise for any behaviors to explore more behavior explanations. Any student behavior can have several reframes and response options.

Challenging Student Behavior

1. Student walks out of class after being teased.

2. Student refuses to complete assignment after receiving “F” on returned assignment.

3. Student talks with classmate during individual assignment.

4. Student curses at teacher when he believes he was falsely accused of something.

Reframe of Student Behavior

1. Initial Reaction(s): This student is disrespectful and purposefully not following class rules.

Reframe(s): This student really showed restraint by walking out instead of fighting, even though walking out felt disrespectful.

New Response Option(s): I will acknowledge the restraint shown, learn more about why the student felt this was the best way to respond, share why this felt disrespectful and is not the best way to respond, and work with student to find better ways to respond when being teased.

Share responses to #3 and #4 above in the lines below.

Consider additional behaviors that can be reframed and identify reframe(s) and new response option(s).

Reframe(s): People only get upset about things they care about. This student cares so much about how she performs that she does not want to try again and risk getting another bad grade.

New Response Option(s): Communicate how difficult it is to try hard and not get the outcome you want, highlight the areas of strength that were shown despite receiving an “F,” and work with the student to find a way to try on the next assignment (i.e., using emotion regulation skills, start with a smaller more manageable part of the assignment).

FIGURE 1.1. Sample TICR Reframe Game. A blank version of the Reframe Game is available as Handout 1.2 (www.guilford.com/pickens-materials).

TABLE 1.4. Six Principles of Trauma-Informed Care

Trauma-informed care principle	How schools engage the principle
Safety	Ensuring a person feels physically and psychologically safe. Schools that engage this principle aim to create emotionally safe relationships, frequently assess whether there are experiences undermining safety for members of the school community, and ensure that safe experiences are praised and continued.
Trustworthiness and Transparency	Engaging processes, relationships, and decisions with the goal of acting with transparency and cultivating trust. Schools displaying this principle clearly communicate rationale for the design of the student learning experience, disciplinary process, and behavioral supports. Students and families are invited to ask questions to gain more clarity and build more trust.
Peer Support	Creating opportunities for individuals who have experienced adverse, traumatic, or challenging life events to support one another. Schools create this environment by destigmatizing seeking support for students, families, and staff with readily available trauma-informed prevention and intervention supports.
Collaboration and Mutuality	Achieving health and wholeness after trauma occurs by working collaboratively with those impacted by trauma to facilitate healing. Schools engage collaboration and mutuality by sharing power with students, parents, and families. Power sharing includes inviting input on school decisions and opportunities to shape how decisions are executed.
Empowerment, Voice, and Choice	Offering choices for how to engage supports and using a strengths-based lens to see how individuals can contribute to their personal recovery from trauma or the recovery of others from trauma. Schools empower students, parents, and families with voice and choice by assessing disciplinary and behavioral support options that are currently available and inviting recommendations for how to expand and deploy resources related to discipline and behavioral support.
Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues	Understanding the impact of past traumatic and historical events on current life experiences and actively working to address bias, discrimination, stereotyping, and other unfair treatment. Schools are responsive to cultural issues when seeking to understand the cultural strengths of all communities comprising the diversity of their school system and work diligently to repair harm from unfair, biased, or discriminatory experiences for students, families, and school staff.

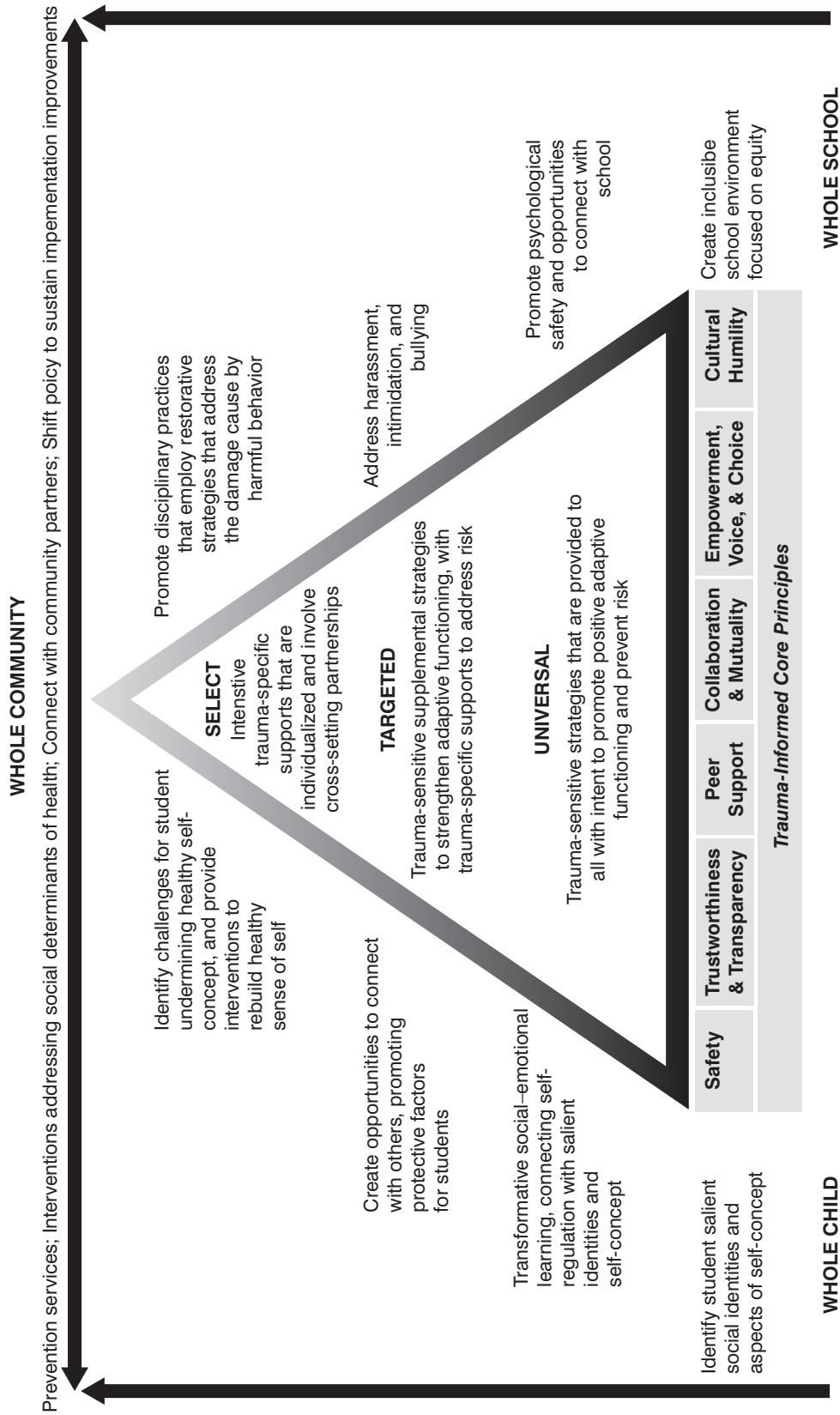


FIGURE 1.2. Six principles of trauma-informed care embedded in the WSCC Model and MTSS. The six principles of trauma-informed care are most holistically implemented in school systems when integrated with the CDC's WSCC Model and MTSS. This figure depicts trauma-informed care principles providing the foundation for engaging this holistic trauma-informed approach in school systems and the categories of supports needed for students and their families. Reprinted with permission from Chafouleas (2021). Copyright © 2021 Springer.

of perspective was as much about learning Tim's story as it was about seeing themselves in his story.

The suffering that Tim expressed was familiar to everyone in the room, because pain is an inescapable human experience. Ms. Rose had long connected to Tim's pain and appreciated how he endured challenging life situations. She understood that his life resembled so many people she cared about and he was doing the best he could to deal with the pain. This was the secret to her special relationship with Tim and her ability to keep him motivated in school. She connected with him in a way that honored his resilience while also giving him boundaries that ensured his **traumatic stress reactions** would not derail him or other students. While she had a trauma-informed mindset, she viewed Tim as more than his trauma. Creating opportunities to learn about a student's story does more than illuminate possible trauma reminders and early warning signs. Their stories give us a glimpse of ourselves and offer insight into how to respond. Seeing a common humanity with our students, we can reflect on how we hope others would treat us during moments of pain.

Before learning the skills discussed in Chapter 2 that educators like Ms. Rose use to set boundaries for students exposed to trauma, it is important to replicate the relationship-building strategies that help educators see themselves in students. These foundational relational routines provide a deeper understanding of the pain students endured, which empowers educators with relationship-based tools for guiding students toward their academic potential. Few experiences allow us to see our students as a mirror to ourselves as much as learning about their ability to face challenges that feel insurmountable and knowing they persevered through them. The ability to persevere is a trait Angela Duckworth (2016) studied to better understand how students face challenges enroute to academic success. In investigating the successes of students from difficult backgrounds she uncovered a hidden ingredient: **grit**. Grit reflects doing the hard work necessary to reach goals and persevering with passion until the job is done, regardless of obstacles along the way. She found that acknowledging students' grit could create a foundation for engaging students more fully in school, and ultimately, improve academic and behavior outcomes.

The less obvious implication of this research is that appreciating the challenges that students face involves learning more about their lives. When opportunities to learn about students' lives are integrated into daily interactions, students are being invited to build attuned and trusting relationships. The connections flowing from these relationships help students feel safe to share information about themselves that is integral to helping students remain academically engaged. Whether you learn about trauma reminders that interfere with paying attention in class or discover the grit your students have shown in the past, new avenues for helping students emerge with each new insight. One tool for opening these avenues without significantly disrupting your academic agenda is Trauma-Informed Culturally Responsive (TICR) connection sessions (Pickens, 2015). TICR connection sessions are unstructured or semistructured opportunities for students and educators to learn more about one another beyond academics and increase attunement and psychological safety in the school.

As the name suggests, TICR connection sessions give educators an opportunity to connect in both trauma-informed and culturally responsive ways. Chapter 2 introduces the



HILLTOP REFLECTION SHEET

Reason for Reflection (staff completes): _____ Date: _____

Student Name: _____

1—TRIGGERS	2—EARLY WARNING SIGNS (What did your body feel like?)	3—FEELING
<input type="checkbox"/> Noise <input type="checkbox"/> Told No <input type="checkbox"/> Peer <input type="checkbox"/> Did Not Earn Points <input type="checkbox"/> Yelling <input type="checkbox"/> Touched <input type="checkbox"/> School Work <input type="checkbox"/> Change in Schedule <input type="checkbox"/> Staff <input type="checkbox"/> Bus Ride <input type="checkbox"/> Home <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Restless <input type="checkbox"/> Sick <input type="checkbox"/> Tightens Body <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling Warm/Hot <input type="checkbox"/> Quick Heartbeat <input type="checkbox"/> Quick Breathing <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____	<input type="checkbox"/> Mad <input type="checkbox"/> Sad <input type="checkbox"/> Happy <input type="checkbox"/> Confused <input type="checkbox"/> Upset <input type="checkbox"/> Frustrated <input type="checkbox"/> Nervous <input type="checkbox"/> Embarrassed <input type="checkbox"/> Other _____
4—THINKING		

Did my problem get ...

Smaller	Bigger
Coping Tool I Used	Coping Tool I Will Use
Keep it Up!	Repair / How will you make this better?

FIGURE 1.3. Sample Reflection Sheet developed by Rockland BOCES Hilltop School TICR Implementation Team.

culturally responsive half of the TICR approach and provides guidance for integrating students' cultural strengths into the school setting. For trauma-informed connections, educators inside and outside the classroom can employ TICR connection sessions as an attunement tool. Review Handout 1.3 to learn more about how to integrate TICR connection sessions into your school. One TICR connection session activity that is particularly helpful for uncovering how students manage challenges involves completing a Reflection Sheet (see Figure 1.3 and Handout 1.4), a document giving students the opportunity to reflect about a challenging situation in the past and identify triggers for feeling stressed, early warning signs in the body that indicate they were stressed, thoughts connected with the challenging experience, other feelings that arose, and their response to the situation. Specifically, the student reflects about whether their response improved or worsened the challenging situation. Done consistently, this activity can increase educator and student awareness about how students effectively cope with situations where trauma reminders are present or manage situations that trigger the students' stress response. When educators also complete the Reflection Sheet and share their responses with students, it gives students a model for how to face difficult situations and use coping skills to effectively handle intense feelings and challenging thoughts.

The reflection sheet engaged during TICR connection sessions encapsulates key ingredients for building trauma-informed connections into the school culture. Students are not asked to share their trauma history during the activity, but there is the expectation that something happened that led to their behavior. Sections asking about triggers, early warning signs, feelings, and thoughts let students know it is okay to have a variety of responses when challenging situations arise. Reflection Sheets are used both to support behavior redirection and celebrate when students deployed coping skills that helped them express their needs while having self-control and respect for others. When you complete this same activity as an educator, students learn that adults have stressful life experiences that prompt strong feelings, too. Your acknowledgment of your own humanity breeds trust in the classroom, because students can see some of themselves in you. When this process prompts you to begin seeing a part of yourself in every student, compassionate responses become the norm. And as illuminated in Chapter 2, one of the most compassionate responses is firm discipline that helps students reimagine who they have the potential to become.

IMPLEMENTATION ACTIVITIES

Infusing the six principles of trauma-informed care into the school culture requires a combination of assessing the baseline for engaging trauma-informed care practices by the school system, and ongoing and consistent integration of practices by educators. The process of creating and sustaining a trauma-informed school climate generally takes 3–5 years at minimum. Below is a set of implementation checklists for different types of educators to engage during a single school year. You and your school system can revisit the checklists in this book each year to build on progress from previous years. These checklists recommend when to start each activity and the ongoing cadence for sustaining progress.