



# National Guidelines for Trauma-Aware Education



These National Guidelines for Trauma-Aware Education have been developed at a critical time for education in Australia via a collaboration between the Queensland University of Technology and the Australian Childhood Foundation.

The National Guidelines for Trauma-Aware Education have been developed in response to a rapidly growing (national and international) awareness regarding the impact of complex trauma on education and life outcomes for children and young people, and a keen desire by educators to do something to address this!

In most Australian schools and early childhood education services there are children and young people who have experienced **Complex Childhood Trauma**. This type of trauma differs from that experienced from on-off or time-limited traumatic events such as natural disasters, motor vehicle accidents or the loss of a loved one. Rather, this type of trauma involves the repeated relational harm that comes from experiences including physical, emotional or sexual abuse; significant neglect; and family and other forms of interpersonal violence. Much of this type of trauma is directed at infants and children by the very people on whom they depend for protection, nurture and care.

There is now clear evidence (particularly from the field of neuroscience) that complex trauma can have a detrimental impact on learning and educational pathways due to the harmful impact of toxic stress on developing nervous systems. This neurobiological impact can impair the capacity for effective relationships and for emotional regulation, which can lead to behavioural and learning complexities that place young students at increased risk of suspension, exclusion and disengagement from schooling. If not addressed, the effects of complex trauma can extend into adulthood where they can have an unfortunate impact on the capacity for safe and effective parenting, which can lead to the intergenerational transmission of this type of trauma.

# National and international research and the experience of educators and other professionals show that societal impacts from complex trauma are concerning and costly.



No social or cultural group is immune from the impact of complex trauma. The prevalence is significant and of growing concern.

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Many (but not all) children and young people living with the outcomes of complex trauma are recipients of **child protection services and may live in out-of-home care**. Some remain unidentified and some continue to suffer the experience of complex trauma.

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National and international **cost-benefit analyses** have identified that the long-term impacts of complex childhood trauma lead to **substantial and growing costs for societies and governments**, including those associated with health, welfare, education, child protection and care, and the downstream costs associated with adult mental health issues, alcohol and drug issues, crime, unemployment, homelessness and other productivity losses.

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Managing the needs and behaviours of students living with the outcomes of complex trauma can have a significant **impact on the personal and professional well-being and consequential attrition rates of educators**, which is also very costly to education budgets.

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Without knowledge and skill in trauma-aware practices, schools often defer to **punitive responses, including suspension and exclusion**, which may exacerbate rather than mediate the needs and behaviours of children and young people.

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Living with unresolved complex trauma can lead to **intergenerational transmission** of trauma. This occurs when unresolved trauma suffered by those who are currently parenting has a serious impact on their capacity to parent in a safe and effective manner, leading to intergenerational harm.

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There are important and powerful learnings regarding the impact of **historical trauma on generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples** throughout Australia. The intergenerational impacts of the European colonisation, the subsequent forced removal of children from families and communities, and the ongoing impacts of interpersonal and institutional racism continues to impact on these communities and families and continues to add complexity to the well-being and education of their children and young people.

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**Education settings are critically positioned** to be able to support the needs of children and young people who have lived through complex trauma through the relational and learning environments they can offer and the amount of time that young students spend in these environments.

# In response to growing awareness regarding complex trauma, many Australian schools and early childhood education services are now working within, or aspiring to develop, trauma-aware education frameworks.

Trauma-aware education is not an extra body of work or responsibility for teachers and school leaders. Rather it is a **systemic process** to ensure all educators are aware of the premises underpinning this approach and are supported to engage in trauma-aware practice. It is a way of **thinking, understanding, believing and acting** so that the harm that complex trauma exerts on the functioning of students is minimised or alleviated, leading to improved (education and life) outcomes not only for these students, but also for their classmates and those adults working hard to deliver inclusive education programs.

Schools are now “crying out” for systemic support for this work, so that all schools are adequately empowered to support all students, particularly those who have lived through complex trauma. The ***National Guidelines for Trauma-Aware Education*** are designed to be part of this “systemic support”.

The rapidly growing body of research that has informed the development of the ***National Guidelines for Trauma-Aware Education***:

- draws from a combination of the science of child and adolescent development, the prevalence and impact of adverse childhood experiences, the longer-term biomedical and intergenerational consequences of complex trauma, and developmental resilience.
- has been revolutionising practice in many areas (including health and mental health, social services, youth services and youth justice) and is now having a growing impact within early childhood education and schooling.

The ***National Guidelines for Trauma-Aware Education*** draw from common elements within growing national and international evidence to provide best practice guidance at both the site level and the education system level.

- ***Guidance is provided at the site level*** to help schools and early childhood services identify elements that will support the development of effective trauma-aware approaches for the children, young people and/or educators attending the site.
- ***Guidance is provided at the system level*** to help education systems identify elements that will help education sites implement trauma-aware approaches.

The ***National Guidelines for Trauma-Aware Education*** also align with the ***Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) Standards***.

- **Standard 1:** Know students and how they learn.
- **Standard 4:** Create and maintain supportive and safe learning environments.
- **Standard 6:** Engage in professional learning.
- **Standard 7:** Engage professionally with colleagues, parents/carers and the community.

As the experience of complex trauma in childhood crosses all social and cultural dimensions of our society, it is important that **all early childhood education services and all schools are supported to work in trauma-aware ways** (not just those sites considered to have high risk populations or disadvantaged students).

The ***National Guidelines for Trauma-Aware Education*** have been developed to support this important and ambitious goal to support all young Australians who have experienced complex trauma.

# Ten guidelines for schools and early childhood services

- 1** Training processes are needed to ensure leaders of schools and services are trauma-aware! It is agreed that:
  - Effective trauma-aware practice relies on effective leadership within education settings.
  - Leaders who are not aware of the impacts of complex childhood trauma on children and adolescents and the means to address the impacts, are far less likely to support and lead trauma-aware schooling thinking and processes.
  - Leaders who are trauma-informed are far more likely to recognise the benefits of trauma-aware schooling and support educational reform in their schools or early childhood services.
- 2** Schools and early childhood services should engage in high-quality, whole-of-staff training in trauma-aware schooling.
  - The mode and intensity of training may be dependent on requirements from individual sites and available training structures. However, this should not limit or deny schools or early childhood services access to training.
  - Where possible, education sectors (districts, regions, dioceses, etc.) should develop internal training structures to provide capacity building activity to schools and early childhood services.
  - Where needed, schools and early childhood services can access accredited external providers to provide training and support that integrates the knowledge of trauma-aware approaches with the educational context. These training programs should incorporate sustainability measures to enable the ongoing application of trauma-aware schooling practices.
- 3** Schools and early childhood services should identify learners living in out-of-home care and ensure that trauma-aware processes are available to enhance the support and education of these learners.
  - The goal for this work is a positive educational trajectory for these learners.
- 4** Trauma-aware practices should be inclusive of all learners in schools and early childhood services.
  - This is important because there are learners in most education settings who are not living in out-of-home care but who are still living with the outcomes of complex trauma and it is important to acknowledge that some of these learners remain unidentified.
- 5** Schools and early childhood services should develop constructive working relationships with parents and carers of learners who are living with the outcomes of complex trauma.
  - It is important that this also includes organisations overseeing foster care and residential care programs.
- 6** Schools and early childhood services should develop constructive working relationships with local child and adolescent support agencies and specialists who provide services to their learners.
  - Schools and early childhood services should be prepared to take a leadership role in these collaborative opportunities where required.
- 7** Children and young people should be involved in the design and evaluation of trauma-aware activities and supports that seek to meet their needs.
  - The participation of children and young people in active feedback processes meet children's rights principles as well as have therapeutic benefit. This could include retrospective input from past learners who are now adults.
- 8** Whole-of-school/program frameworks should be implemented that:
  - Address the needs of learners living with the outcomes of complex trauma.
  - Are also appropriate for and supportive of all learners.
  - Are protective of the professional and personal well-being of educators.
  - Build capacity in the resilience of educators.
  - Are inclusive of all adult staff members within the school (including front office staff, education support staff, etc.) to ensure consistency of practice.
- 9** Schools and early childhood programs should acknowledge the potential impact that supporting traumatised children and young people can have on educators and other site personnel and should implement measures to provide support, supervision and reflective practice to address such impact.
  - It is proposed that this will minimise concerns with educator attrition rates and address concerns with the impact that supporting these learners can have on the personal and professional well-being of educators.
- 10** Policies developed by individual schools and early childhood services should be reviewed to identify and address elements that might enhance or hinder trauma-aware schooling.
  - It is vital that behaviour management policy is examined in this light.

# Ten guidelines for education systems

- 1** Training processes are needed to ensure leaders of education systems are trauma-aware. It is agreed that effective trauma-aware education practice relies on informed and supportive system leadership to develop policy and funding frameworks to support and resource the embedding of trauma-aware practice in education systems.
- 2** Education system law and policy should be reviewed to identify and address elements that might enhance or hinder trauma-aware schooling. This is important at all levels of systems, (including national, state, local, and jurisdiction).
- 3** The embedding of a trauma-aware approach at a system level should be supported by a long-term implementation strategy and change management approach that is committed to by governing bodies and by government.
- 4** Embedding a trauma-aware approach at a system level should take account of the cultural and geographic diversity of Australian states and territories, as well as the varying needs of schools and early childhood services and communities.
- 5** A trauma-aware approach should be developed in consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and leaders to ensure the cultural strength of the approach for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander learners.
- 6** Specific consideration is needed for (but not limited to) education settings:
  - in remote locations
  - that have boarding accommodations
  - that offer alternate or specialist education programs
  - with learners from refugee backgrounds
  - with learners living in out-of-home care
  - with learners with disabilities
  - servicing learners living with mental health concerns.
- 7** Cross-agency (whole-of-government and non-government) funding and staffing of training and support programs should be investigated and negotiated as a cost-effective strategy for enhancing outcomes for learners accessing a number of services.
- 8** Collaborations between education systems and Australian universities and other tertiary training programs should be explored to help with pre-service and post-graduate training provision, resource development, program evaluation, and further research.
- 9** Trauma-aware principles and implementation strategies should be incorporated into pre-service training and ongoing professional development for educators and support practitioners (including school psychologists, counsellors or therapists; teacher aides, chaplains, and school-based nurses and police officers, etc.).
- 10** Education reform in the area of trauma-aware schooling should be quarantined from political and leadership change.





## Conclusion

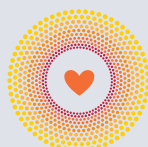
It is timely for Australian education systems and all Australian schools and early childhood education services to establish trauma-aware schooling processes, so that all educators can contribute to minimising the long-term impacts of complex trauma for young Australians and for state, territory, and federal budgets.

Trauma-aware education can enhance the education experience of learners living with the outcomes of complex trauma. It can achieve reparative outcomes for learners, minimise behaviour concerns, lessen the use of suspension and exclusion, enhance the support and educational achievements of learners living in out-of-home care, improve the personal and professional well-being and attrition rates of educators, and minimise long-term, large-scale personal and economic burden associated with unresolved complex trauma.

Trauma-aware practice in education will support improved academic and well-being outcomes not only for learners with complex trauma backgrounds but all learners.

A systemic approach is required to provide successful, consistent and sustainable outcomes so that all educators are informed and supported to implement trauma-aware practice in classrooms across the country.

These national guidelines provide an important framework for ongoing education policy and practice development across Australia!



**Australian  
Childhood  
Foundation**