

PRACTICE GUIDE

– Engaging with Families in Trauma-Informed Schools



Introduction

This Practice Guide aims to help schools to embed a culture of trauma-informed practice using a whole-of-school approach. This approach is about ensuring that the culture, policies, and practices within a school recognise and respond to the effects of trauma. It includes all of the school community, from students, staff, families, and the broader community.

A whole-of-school approach to trauma-informed practice is also about considering the way in which schools can build a deeper connection with ALL families to support better outcomes for children and young people.

This guide provides practical strategies that support family engagement and considers what this means for vulnerable families where the impact of trauma may be present.

For the purpose of this guide we are referring to families as inclusive of parents, step-parents, extended family members, foster and kinship carers. Where the term children has been used, we are referring to both children and young people.



INSIDE THIS GUIDE, YOU'LL FIND INFORMATION ON THE FOLLOWING:

- Why should we work with families?
- Trauma and families
- Making Space for Learning – supporting family engagement
- Planning for family engagement
- Connecting from the start
- Building relationships
- Practical strategies

The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children's families. If educators view children simply as students, they are likely to see the family as separate from the school. That is, the family is expected to do its job and leave the education of children to the schools. If educators view students as children, they are likely to see both the family and the community as partners with the school in children's education and development.

Dr Joyce Epstein

Why should we work with families?

As a school, you are engaging with families every day. For many children, involving their family in how the school is responding to their needs at school can be the most effective way of supporting a child at school. This means that strategies and responses to behaviour can be consistent across home and school. It also helps you, as a school, gain a greater understanding of the needs of the child.

When we talk about engaging with families, we need to remember that all families are different and have different histories, needs and experiences. While many families may find engaging with their child's school a positive experience, we know that trauma can have a substantial impact on individuals, families, and communities. Some families will engage easily and will look for opportunities to be involved in leadership, planning and advocacy activities. For other families, engaging with a school can be daunting or just too difficult due to the vulnerabilities they face as a family.

This guide is intended to support your school's engagement with ALL families. This means for some families we need to think differently about how we can support and create the conditions and an environment that enables families to connect and engage.

There are many practical strategies and approaches that can be used to support family engagement. It is particularly important to consider families who have been significantly impacted by trauma and how we can support these families. We also need to recognise and be sensitive to the ways in which trauma may be experienced differently across cultures, genders, and historical contexts.

We know that when families feel valued and respected by their child's school, they are more likely to be engaged in their child's education and to reinforce the school's efforts to support the child's learning and wellbeing. This is particularly important for children who, as a response to the trauma they have experienced have a range of additional needs. Outcomes for these children can be improved when their families, the school and where needed, external services work together. We also know that when families are involved in the school community, beyond their own child, there are benefits for the whole school.



Trauma and families

In every school, there is a cohort of families that are significantly impacted by trauma – these families will often need specific support as they may find it extremely difficult to engage with a school. We need to understand the deep vulnerability that many families experience and the impact this has on their ability to trust and engage with teachers and other staff.

Some families might be experiencing their own trauma, living in situations where they or their children may not be safe. Others might be experiencing homelessness, poverty, mental ill health, family violence or other issues. These layers of vulnerability and complexity affect their capacity to engage.

For some families just having contact with a school may evoke strong emotions and memories, especially for families who have had negative experiences with school settings, when they were there as student, or as the family of a child.

When we think about families impacted by trauma, we need to consider what we know about trauma theory.

A trauma-informed approach to engaging with families is an approach that recognises the impact of trauma on individuals and families and seeks to create a safe and supportive environment for them. This approach involves understanding the potential effects of trauma on a family's ability to engage in services and being sensitive to the unique needs and experiences of each family.

Families cannot engage unless they feel safe. This relational safety is the same as what children need to feel safe and connected at school. It may take time to build safety and trust because some families may not have experiences of positive relationships. We need to support families, to feel safe and to build relationships to be able to connect and engage.

For some families it may be useful to involve external services or professional support staff in your school to provide the scaffolding a family might need to engage in their child's learning. Connecting or referring families to services and resources may also provide additional support the family need.

It is also important to think about any services a child or family are involved with. When a child or young person is receiving extensive support from external agencies there is much to be gained from working together with a shared goal to support a child to heal from the impacts of trauma.

Ultimately, we want children who have experienced trauma to feel safe at school as they engage in reparative relational connection with staff. Building relationships between school and family also supports a child's connection and safety.



Making SPACE for Learning

SUPPORTING FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

The Trauma-Informed Practice Professional Learning Program is underpinned by Australian Childhood Foundation's Making SPACE for Learning Framework. The Framework translates neurobiological evidence related to trauma and considers principles and strategies to better understand and meet the needs of students who have experienced trauma. We can use the domains (SPACE) from the Framework to consider how to create a safe, predictable, and connected school that engages with all families, including those impacted by trauma.



FIVE DOMAINS OF MAKING SPACE FOR LEARNING FRAMEWORK

Staged	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consider your knowledge of neurobiology (and concepts such as regulation, window of tolerance and safety) and how you can apply this when engaging with families, particularly those who have been impacted by trauma.
Predictable	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Find ways to support families to participate in school processes (help them to learn how the school operates).• Be predictable in how you communicate with families.• Use reminders and visual signs with the school.
Adaptive	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Consider what families need to feel physically and psychologically safe.• Create a culture and physical setting that is safe and welcoming.• Ensure interpersonal interactions promote a sense of emotional, social, and psychological security and well-being.
Connected	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be prepared that building relationships requires trust which will take time for some families.• Listen to families about what they need and consider how you might be able to support their needs.• Use all the same strategies you would use with children to build connection – listening, mutual respect, consider tone of speech, body language and facial expressions.
Enabled	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Focus on the strengths and skills of families.• Consider how can you resource/empower families to be able to engage with the school.• Share decision-making responsibilities with family members. Remember that empowering families and carers involves enhancing families' ability to solve problems for themselves.• Consider the culture of students and families in your schools and how you can engage with their culture.

Planning for family engagement

Your school planning process is a useful way to embed trauma-informed practice at your school, including consideration of how you will actively work to engage all families.

Below are some things for you to consider in your school improvement planning that promote family engagement.



- Assess the level of engagement that exists now – is your engagement with families what you want it to be, or can it be improved?



- Consider in your plan how you can engage families who are vulnerable, have been impacted by trauma or living in complex circumstances. Think about this at a school level, classroom level and individual family level.



- Involve your school wellbeing and support staff who may be working with vulnerable families. They may have strategies that are working which can be shared so that all staff use the same consistent approach.



- Identify what challenges might exist for your school in building effective relationships with families – and then plan how you can overcome these.



- As a school, commit to transparent and open communication with all families and explore what this means for your school.



- Review your welcoming processes and explore how families feel when they enter your school.



- Consider whether your school culture recognises the importance of all families?



- Ensure your website is useful for families, engaging and easy to navigate.



- Ensure the communication mechanisms you use are accessible – do all families in your school have an internet connection, a smart phone or device? What is their digital literacy? Do you need to broaden the way you communicate with families so that everyone is included?



- Connect family engagement to children's learning goals and outcomes.



- Share good practice with other schools and educators.



- Develop your own Plan/Framework/Guide for Family Engagement.



- Believe in the human capital of families – skills, knowledge, cultural competency and advocacy.

Connecting from the start

As children start school, it is an ideal time to set up effective strategies that support families to feel connected with the school. Starting school can be a time of uncertainty for many families, however it is also an opportunity to engage with families. For most children this will be when they are starting kindergarten or prep. It is also important when new families come to the school.

Here are some considerations to support connection as early as possible.



- Think about how you provide information to new families about your school and the way in which your school operates on a daily basis. Include information about the school's culture and values.



- Support families before school starts. This can include suggestions for routines that accompany the usual school day, such as practising getting ready for school and establishing a bedtime and waking up routine.



- Involve local early learning programs – talk to families about your schools' approach to trauma-informed practice. For example, if your school has developed a new regulation space or has changed the way behaviour is managed, share this with families.



- Work with your parent group or association to formalise the welcome of new families to the school. Follow up with the new families once the school routine is established.



- Communicate to the whole school community, including families to ensure consistent approaches to behaviour management are understood.



- Consider establishing a mentoring program to help new families learn from the experience of other families.



- Use digital resources or outreach to make and keep contact with families leading up to school starting.



- Remember to re-engage families when class transitions happen and continue to build relationships.



- Ensure that when a family or student changes school, you support that transition by passing on information about what can support the student's learning. This is particularly important for children who have been impacted by trauma and can support predictability, consistency, and routines in a new school environment.



- As well as new families to the school, consider the needs of new carers when a child in out of home care changes placement.

Building relationships

Engaging with families is about building relationships and we know that for many families, relationships will take time to build. For some families engaging with the school will be a gradual process and will only happen when there is trust and a feeling of safety.

Building relationships with families is about:



- Being consistent and listening carefully to families about what they need and following through with action where needed.



- Listening deeply, validating and responding to their concerns and what they have been through is part of building a relationship.



- Anticipating any underlying needs and addressing issues. Remember that emotional needs (especially fears and anxieties) need to be addressed especially if family members are feeling distressed.



- Ensuring the perspectives and concerns of families are heard.



- Treating families with empathy and understanding their needs as individuals.



- Considering cultural and spiritual needs.



- Building connection by greeting families by name and getting to know them. It can be useful to find out about a hobby, a story or a family's strengths.



- Building trust by being consistent, reliable and responsive. Maintain confidentiality.



- Celebrating student success and recognise non-academic achievements.



- Being transparent – explain school policies and procedures openly. Communicate proactively about both positive and negative issues. Be honest about what the school can and cannot provide.



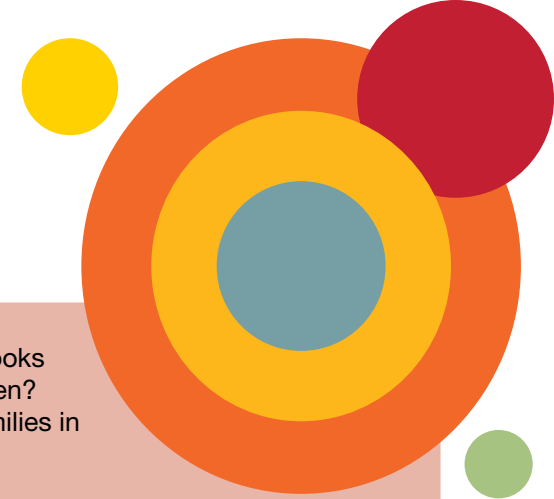
- Providing opportunities for families to engage with the school in different ways. Helping in the classroom might be overwhelming for some families but attending a class morning tea might be feel more manageable for them.



- Being prepared, particularly for families where there is trauma, to take things slowly and allow opportunities for families to engage when they are ready.



Practical strategies



1 Use your school newsletter and social media to provide information about what your school might be doing to embed trauma-informed practice. This might include information about sensory or regulation spaces, changes to timetabling or break times or information about approaches and strategies being used in the classroom.

2 Use a communication book (especially in younger grades to collaborate with families about what works at school and encourage them to use the same approaches at home).

3 Create a safe and welcoming environment that can help put families at ease.

4 Actively work to engage families by welcoming them into the school/classroom and regularly providing positive feedback about the child.

5 Think about where families can engage with you – is it easier for a family member to chat with you at the school gate rather than the principal's office?

6 Consider what engagement looks like for families of older children? How can you engage with families in a high school setting?

7 Teach families new skills that they can reinforce at home.

8 Consider holding events at different times to accommodate a range of families and needs.

9 When you are holding events or meeting with a family, encourage family members to bring a friend or support person.

10 Model predictability – for example, remind families regularly of when you are available to meet and provide written reminders of important points of contact with you.

11 Have regular contact and remember to have contact when things are going well, not just when there is an issue. It is much easier to have a difficult conversation when there is already a trusted relationship.

Practical strategies

12 Consider the way you communicate with families – use a range of approaches and remember the importance of plain language.

13 Think about language when talking with families. This is important when children are in out of home care but also applies to stepfamilies or extended family who are caring for children and young people.

14 Consider how families can be involved in leadership roles, advocacy and mentoring other parents.

15 Prepare for conversations that may be challenging for you. Think about your own regulation and where you are in your 'window of tolerance'. Make sure you are calm before contacting families, particularly if you are anticipating a difficult exchange. Think about whether you need take a break before making a phone call. Do you need to talk it over with someone or debrief afterwards?

16 Provide education and resources to families about how you are embedding a trauma-informed approach. Helping families to understand more about the way a school works can ensure consistent messaging and approaches between home and school.

17 Support adult family members build up their core capabilities. This can have a lifelong intergenerational impact if adults support the development of these skills in children.

18 Consider physical safety and privacy if you need to meet with families or carers. For example, asking a parent to meet in the principal's office may not be safe for someone who has negative experiences from their own schooling.

19 Do a school audit. Think about physical safety, digital safety and welcoming practices.




Questions to consider

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE QUESTIONS

- What could make your school a safer place for all families?
- How can we use the knowledge held by families to enhance children’s experiences at school?
- How can family knowledge, used alongside educator knowledge, inform decisions made in schools and enhance curricular programming and outcomes for children?
- How can we capture the complexities and the successes of our work and the resulting impact on children, families, and educators?
- What is required for educators and families to walk alongside one another, for the benefit of children’s development, learning and improved outcomes?
- How can we continue to bring families along on our trauma-informed journey?




Australian Childhood Foundation’s school audit tool can be used to guide planning and identifying areas for improvement including family engagement. The audit tool is included as an appendix on the following page. A range of resources are also available on the [Australian Childhood Foundation](#) website.



Making SPACE for Learning – Site Audit Tool

This audit tool can be used to evaluate the policies and initiatives of a school that resource and equip different levels of the school structure to undertake trauma informed practice. In the following table, list strategies, policies or other processes currently undertaken that support traumatised students at your school.



	Whole Site	Staff	Classroom / Group	Small Group	Individual Student / Child
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<div style="background-color: #c00000; color: white; border-radius: 50%; width: 30px; height: 30px; margin: 0 auto; display: flex; align-items: center; justify-content: center;">P</div> <p style="font-size: 0.7em; margin: 0;">Predictable</p>					
<div style="background-color: #c00000; color: white; border-radius: 50%; width: 30px; height: 30px; margin: 0 auto; display: flex; align-items: center; justify-content: center;">A</div> <p style="font-size: 0.7em; margin: 0;">Adaptive</p>					
<div style="background-color: #c00000; color: white; border-radius: 50%; width: 30px; height: 30px; margin: 0 auto; display: flex; align-items: center; justify-content: center;">C</div> <p style="font-size: 0.7em; margin: 0;">Connected</p>					
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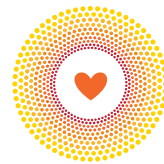
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S Staged					
P Predictable					
A Adaptive					
C Connected					
E Enabled					

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