



All staff handout

9. Guiding Questions for Policies and Procedures

Trauma-sensitive schools establish policies and procedures that align with trauma sensitivity, which include policies related to discipline practices, communication with students and families, and safety procedures. Policies and practices are reviewed regularly to ensure alignment with the mission and goals of a trauma-sensitive school. Schools look to eliminate policies and procedures that could re-traumatize students by creating environments or situations that replicate the events or dynamics of a previous trauma.

Potentially re-traumatizing practice for students and families may include the following:

- Rigid, punishment-driven environments
- Harsh discipline practices that mimic abusive experiences for youth
- Crisis intervention practices or emergency procedures that further traumatize students
- Disrespectful treatment of students and families
- Communication with parents and community partners that disregards student and family privacy and confidentiality
- Diminished student and family voice
- Policies that minimize choice and control
- Seclusion and restraint

Consider the guiding questions in this handout as you explore how your school's existing policies and procedures related to discipline, communication, and safety align with a trauma-sensitive approach. Identify specific practices that your school currently uses and what you would like to do more of as it relates to policies and procedures to maximize support for students and minimize risk of harm.

Discipline

For students affected by trauma, traditional school discipline practices that include harsh language, negative interactions, and removal from the community may mimic traumatic experiences, trigger trauma-related responses, and reinforce the belief that adults are not predictably safe and trustworthy.

Guiding questions

1. What is our primary approach to discipline?
2. How effective is this approach for students exposed to trauma?
3. How does our approach to discipline align with the core principles of trauma sensitivity (i.e., trauma awareness; safety; choice, control, and empowerment; relationship driven; culturally competent; collaborative; holistic)?
4. How do our discipline policies and practices facilitate or hinder student, family, and staff well-being? For example, are there practices that could be re-traumatizing to students and families?
5. Who is involved in developing discipline policies and procedures?
6. What do we need to do differently to ensure a trauma-sensitive approach?

Trauma-sensitive discipline practices

Check the discipline practices your school currently uses. Circle the practices you would like to add or use more often.

	Engage in proactive planning.
	Identify the reasons behind behaviors.
	Hold students accountable but in clear, understandable, and respectful ways.
	Implement positive behavioral supports.
	Minimize isolation and disconnection from the community.
	Use restorative approaches.
	Model respectful, nonviolent relationships and restorative practices.

Communication

Trauma-sensitive schools establish communication policies that consider the potential impact of trauma on students and families. In all cases, *how* information is communicated is as important as *what* information is communicated and can make a critical difference in whether a situation escalates or becomes a learning opportunity.

Guiding questions

1. How do we currently consider trauma as it relates to our communication policies and procedures?
2. How does our approach to communication with students and families align with the core principles of trauma sensitivity (i.e., trauma awareness; safety; choice, control, and empowerment; relationship driven; culturally competent; collaborative; holistic)?
3. How do our communication policies and procedures facilitate or hinder student, family, and staff well-being? For example, are there practices that could be re-traumatizing to students and families?
4. Who is involved in developing communication policies and procedures?
5. What do we need to do differently to ensure a trauma-sensitive approach?

Trauma-sensitive communication practices

Check the communication practices your school currently uses. Circle the practices you would like to add or use more often.

	Maintain privacy and confidentiality in all communication with students, parents, and community partners.
	Communicate information clearly.
	Communicate information in the family's home language.
	Ensure all communication processes are respectful of students and families.
	Consider potential trauma triggers for families in all communication (e.g., letters home, calls, meetings and conferences).
	Create formal structures for family feedback.
	Develop trauma-sensitive processes for communicating with families regarding difficult issues, such as filing abuse and neglect reports or discussing their child's trauma-related difficulties.

Safety

In a trauma-sensitive school, policies and procedures are in place to ensure safety for students and families. Trauma-sensitive schools also ensure that staff members feel safe at their jobs and that emergency procedures take trauma into account.

Guiding questions

1. How do we currently consider trauma in our policies and procedures related to school safety?
2. How do we currently consider trauma in our policies and practices related to emergency planning?

3. How does our approach to safety and emergency planning with students and families align with the core principles of trauma sensitivity (i.e., trauma awareness; safety; choice, control, and empowerment; relationship driven; culturally competent; collaborative; holistic)?
4. How do our safety procedures facilitate or hinder student, family, and staff well-being? For example, are there practices that could be re-traumatizing to students and families?
5. Who is involved in developing safety procedures?
6. What do we need to do differently to ensure a trauma-sensitive approach?

Trauma-sensitive safety practices

Check the safety practices your school currently uses. Circle the practices you would like to add or use more often.

	Create procedures for ensuring physical and emotional safety for all students.
	Create procedures for ensuring physical and emotional safety for all staff.
	Develop policies related to maintaining confidentiality and privacy as it relates to student, family, and staff safety issues (e.g., custody issues, experiences of domestic violence, restraining orders).
	Develop and uphold policies related to bullying, harassment, and other forms of violence in the school.
	Incorporate trauma-sensitive practices into emergency procedures to address and mitigate the impact of acute traumatic events on students and staff.

References

- Cole, S. F., Eisner, A., Gregory, M., & Ristuccia, J. (2013). Creating and advocating for trauma-sensitive schools. Massachusetts Advocates for Children. Retrieved from <https://traumasensitiveschools.org/tlpi-publications/download-a-free-copy-of-a-guide-to-creating-trauma-sensitive-schools/>
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- Guarino, K., Soares, P., Konnath, K., Clervil, R., & Bassuk, E. (2009). Trauma-informed organizational toolkit for homeless services. Rockville, MD: Center for Mental Health Services, SAMHSA.