

Why every teacher needs to know about childhood trauma

September 11 2020, by Emily Berger and Karen Martin



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Mental health issues [among children are on the rise](#) due to the impacts of the COVID pandemic, including lockdowns.

Recent [reports show](#) there has been a 28% spike in calls to the phone counseling service Kids Helpline between March and July 2020

compared with the same period last year in Victoria, which is under stage 3 and 4 restrictions.

This prompted the [state government](#) to fast-track its plan to provide every state [secondary school](#) with funding to recruit its own mental-health support practitioner by the end of next year. Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews [announced in August](#) more than 1,500 [school staff](#) would have additional mental-health training in partnership with Headspace to help identify at-risk students as remote learning continues.

Such moves are important. But in this world of uncertainty, as well as the way the pandemic may be increasing instances of family violence and other types of abuse, all school staff would benefit from having an adequate understanding of the impact of [trauma](#) and adversity on [children](#).

Teachers and school leaders would also benefit from knowledge about trauma and adversity when responding to children's challenging behaviors. In education, such understanding and techniques are known as "trauma-informed pedagogy."

What is childhood trauma?

Trauma is the response to exposure to a stressful or traumatic event, or a series of such events or experiences.

Most children have nurturing home environments, but a [concerning number](#) experience trauma through abuse or neglect in Australia. It's [estimated around](#) 8.9% of children experience physical abuse, 8.6% sexual abuse, 8.7% emotional abuse and 2.4% neglect. The rates could be higher as such experiences are difficult to measure.

Children may also experience trauma or adversity by observing family

violence, parent separation, having a parent incarcerated or with a mental illness, or due to grief from the loss of a loved one. Trauma can occur because of conflict or war, or due to a natural disaster, such as the recent bushfires.

COVID-19 has led to higher amounts of traumatic experiences and adversity in households. Around one-third of Australian families are going through [increased financial hardship](#) and, [for many women](#), the pandemic has coincided with the beginning of family violence, or an increase in it.

Trauma [often has negative effects](#) on children's development and behavior. It can increase the risk of [depression](#) and suicide attempts, [psychotic disorders](#) such as schizophrenia, and [alcohol and drug](#) use.

It's important to note, not all children are negatively impacted by trauma—[some even experience](#) posttraumatic growth in which they learn more about themselves and their strengths.

A strong [body of evidence](#) shows trauma can affect brains structures linked to learning, and control of emotions and behavior. These effects can [make it difficult](#) for children to learn, make friends and develop positive relationships with teachers.

Trauma and adversity can also [disrupt children's impulse control](#) in the classroom and on the playground.

What trauma-informed practice looks like

The [Royal Commission into child sexual abuse](#) recommended schools be "trauma-informed." Being trauma-informed does not mean teachers and schools must be trained to treat trauma. Rather they must understand the impact it can have on children's lives.

An Australian Institute of Family Studies discussion paper on trauma-informed practice notes: "To provide trauma-informed services, all staff of an organization, from the receptionist to the direct care worker and the board of directors, must understand how violence impacts on the lives of the people being served so that every interaction is consistent with the recovery process and reduces the possibility of re-traumatisation."

So, for schools to be trauma-informed, school staff need to know about the prevalence and consequences of [childhood trauma](#). Increasing the confidence of school staff about how to work with children impacted by trauma and adversity is also important.

Examples of trauma-informed practice include:

- providing [teachers with information](#) about how best to teach and support children to regulate their emotions and build positive relationships. This includes getting children to [identify their emotions](#) and check in on themselves and others around them to get acquainted with how they and their peers react to situations
- assessing and revising school policies and practices that may re-traumatize or trigger anxiety or aggression in students (such as student isolation practices)
- providing staff with [self-care strategies](#), such as meditation, to help them respond to their experiences working with children impacted by adversity or trauma
- encouraging staff to recognize [students' strengths](#) and help students develop their own learning goals.

Trauma-informed practice can help teachers too

Teachers and school leaders already have high demands on their time, and adding another burden to their work is untenable. But trauma-

informed practice is not necessarily an add-on. Rather, it is a different way of working and communicating to improve students' relationships with school staff, and their school engagement and learning.

Our research with Victorian teachers [found they want more support and training](#) to be able to [understand and support](#) children with trauma.

Some US research suggests [trauma-informed training](#) and processes in schools can improve staff knowledge and confidence in responding to children impacted by trauma and adversity.

Evaluations of [trauma-informed practice](#) in schools show these programs are having a positive impact. But rigorous research is lacking and more is required. We do know though, [teachers responding sensitively](#) to the impact of trauma helps children better engage in school and gives them a sense of belonging. It can also reduce disruptive behaviors and [school suspensions](#).

By developing knowledge about the impact of trauma on children, teachers are likely to develop stronger relationships, and a greater sense of confidence, with these children, and lower classroom disruption. This [could lead](#) to increased job satisfaction and reduced risk of burnout.

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