

# An Introduction to Trauma-Informed Programs and Practices for Schools (TIPPS)

Creating Safe, Nurturing, and Inclusive Learning Environments for All Students



SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK  
TRAUMA-INFORMED PROGRAMS  
AND PRACTICES FOR SCHOOLS  
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN



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## Key Terms

**Adverse childhood experiences**, often referred to as ACEs, are potentially traumatic events that occur during childhood, including abuse and neglect, growing up in a family with substance misuse or mental health problems, economic hardship, or parental divorce or separation.

**Adversity** describes stressful and potentially harmful events and experiences.

**Equity** ensures that every student has the tools and support they need to succeed, given their individual identity and circumstances.

**Implicit bias** explains how stereotypes and unconscious associations about others influence an individual's interactions and behaviors.

**Inclusion** is the act of creating environments in which any individual or group can feel welcomed, respected, supported, and valued so they can fully participate.

**Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)** is a psychiatric condition characterized by symptoms such as intrusive thoughts, sleep disturbances, nightmares, hyperarousal, changes in memory and concentration, and startle responses.

**Resilience** is the process of successfully adapting to adversities.

**Restorative Practices** use collaborative systems of communication, expectation-setting, and accountability to resolve conflict and strengthen relationships.

**Trauma** is any disturbing experience that results in significant fear, helplessness, confusion, or other disruptive, intense feelings with long-lasting negative effects on functioning.

**Trauma-informed schools** provide children with the care, support, and resources they need to successfully cope with and recover from trauma and achieve their potential.

## Transforming Education through Trauma-Informed Programs and Practice

**Children spend a significant portion of their lives in school, and for many, school is a positive experience. But for others—especially young people who have experienced adversity and trauma—school is not a place where they feel valued or safe to express themselves and explore their potential. For some, school can even be a source of additional trauma.** Despite the best efforts of caring educators, most schools aren't equipped to fully meet the needs of students who have experienced adversity and trauma.

We can do better, and given the prevalence of adversity and trauma among students in the United States and the long-term health effects of trauma, we must. With a trauma-informed approach to education, we can make school a place not just for learning and growing, but for healing—transforming schools into places where students and educators are excited to be and where every member of the school community feels respected, valued, engaged, and supported to reach their full potential.

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***WE CAN MAKE SCHOOL A PLACE NOT JUST FOR  
LEARNING AND GROWING, BUT FOR HEALING***

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Safe, inclusive, nurturing environments mitigate the effects of trauma, promote resilience, and help all students to be more engaged and successful in school. Trauma-Informed Programs and Practices in Schools (TIPPS) is a way to realize this vision. TIPPS is an evidence-based framework that guides implementation of trauma-informed practices in classrooms, schools, and school systems. TIPPS also is a center of excellence that brings together experts in social work, education, and public health to share knowledge and resources with K-12 educators and communities.

This paper provides a brief overview of adversity, trauma, and resilience and the benefits of a systems-wide approach to actualizing equity by addressing trauma. It also introduces the TIPPS framework, 10 core recommendations for implementing trauma-informed programs and practices, and some of the science related to adversity and resilience that informs the TIPPS approach.

We invite you to learn more and join us in the critical work of creating safe, nurturing, and inclusive learning environments for all students.



## Understanding Adversity and Trauma

Trauma is a leading health concern in the United States, where more than half of adults (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2019) have had at least one adverse childhood experience. The more ACEs a person has, the greater the potential impact on their mental and physical health, including depression, substance use, obesity, and heart disease (CDC 2019). ACEs are particularly prevalent among children living in poverty and in under-resourced communities (Gilbert et al., 2015; Herrenkohl et al., 2018), as well as among Black, Hispanic, and multiracial individuals (Merrick et al., 2018).

Children can be exposed to adversity and trauma at home, at school, and in their communities. Adverse experiences can include exposure to violence, abuse and neglect, bullying and peer harassment, and natural disasters, among others. Racism, prejudice, and discrimination can also be sources of trauma for both children and adults (Herrenkohl et al., 2020, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has been a significant source of adversity and trauma for many Americans, but particularly children of color. During the pandemic, the risk of loss of a parent or grandparent was highest among Hispanic and Black children, and 65% of children who lost primary caregivers were racial or ethnic minorities (Hillis et al., 2021).

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***MORE THAN 60% OF ADULTS HAVE HAD AT LEAST  
ONE ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCE***

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Not all forms of childhood adversity are traumatic, and whether an event is traumatic depends on its type, severity, and duration. Children who experience chronic stress from abuse, poverty, and racism are at high risk for developing post-traumatic stress symptoms such as anxiety, depression, and hypervigilance, as well as concentration and memory challenges that can affect school performance (Herrenkohl et al., 2021).

The toxic stress associated with ACEs can even change brain development (CDC, 2019), affecting how young people learn and function socially and emotionally (Herrenkohl et al., 2021). But with the right supports, children can rebound from adversity and heal from trauma. That's why it is critical that school professionals understand the impacts of adversity and trauma on students and what they can do to help.

In the classroom, trauma can look like ...



**Withdrawal from  
others and activities**



**Irritability**



**Heightened sensitivity  
to criticism**



**Decreased attention  
and concentration**



**Anxiety, fear, worry,  
or safety concerns**



**Decreased academic  
performance**



**Increased impulsivity  
and risk-taking**



**Difficulty trusting  
others**



**Discomfort with  
feelings and thoughts**

**Learn More about Adversity and Trauma**

>> [tipps.ssw.umich.edu/adversity-trauma-resilience/](https://tipps.ssw.umich.edu/adversity-trauma-resilience/)

## Promoting Resilience

Despite the adversities they face, children can thrive if they are also exposed to protective environments and relationships that buffer the impacts of exposure to adversity and promote healthy development. Helping children to develop resilience is one of the most important ways we can mitigate the effects of trauma and adversity. The behaviors, thoughts, and actions associated with resilience can be learned and nurtured through positive relationships with family members, peers, school professionals, and other adults (American Psychological Association, 2020).

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### You can support resilience in children by:

- Helping them feel safe and nurtured following a traumatic event
  - Providing access to social and emotional supports
  - Fostering strong positive relationships with adults and peers
  - Cultivating strong social, emotional, and problem-solving skills
- 



The methods often used to address trauma in schools are too focused on individual functioning and not enough on how aspects of the school environment influence student outcomes. We need systems-oriented, trauma-informed approaches so that all students with trauma histories are helped to become resilient to the effects of trauma and traumatic stress.

—Todd Herrenkohl, TIPPS Director

Marion Elizabeth Blue Professor of Children and Families  
University of Michigan School of Social Work



## Creating a Healing Educational Environment

Addressing trauma isn't just the responsibility of the individuals who experience it. An effective response requires participation from the broader community and public (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014)—including schools. Because children spend a significant portion of their lives in school and the K-12 educational system is available to all children regardless of need or their ability to pay, trauma-informed programs in schools could dramatically change the life trajectories of children who experience adversity and trauma (Herrenkohl et al., 2020, 2021). When we create safe, nurturing, and inclusive learning environments that promote resilience, all members of the school community can benefit.

To promote healing and resilience among children who have experienced adversity and trauma, schools themselves must be trauma informed. Adopting a school- and systems-wide approach to addressing trauma can reach a wide range of students at relatively low cost (Herrenkohl et al., 2020) and is less likely than individualized interventions to stigmatize students who need help (Herrenkohl et al., 2019).

A comprehensive trauma-informed approach to education is a key part of creating an equitable educational environment that benefits everyone in the school community—not just students. For instance, professionals who work in schools serving under-resourced and high-poverty communities are particularly vulnerable to burnout and secondary trauma from their work with children who have experienced trauma (Herrenkohl et al., 2021). A trauma-informed environment can promote healing and resilience among school professionals, too.



## What is a trauma-informed school?

Trauma-informed schools provide children with the care, support, and resources they need to successfully cope with and recover from trauma and work to their potential. Schools do this by:

- Ensuring all members of the school community feel safe, respected, and valued
- Increasing awareness of the signs and symptoms of trauma
- Increasing awareness of biases and stereotypes
- Building community
- Developing and modeling positive relationships
- Reducing punitive discipline
- Communicating and reinforcing goals and expectations
- Avoiding deficit thinking and language
- Incorporating social-emotional skills and positive coping
- Creating a support system to address emergent needs

“ This work is more important than ever ... every school can and should be doing this.

—Michigan School Health Coordinator and TIPPS Partner

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## Trauma-Informed Programs and Practices for Schools

Trauma-informed programs and practices are core components of “whole-child, whole-school” improvement efforts that promote well-being among students who are affected by adversity and trauma (Herrenkohl et al., 2020, 2021). Trauma-informed programs and practices can also address some critical equity issues in schools and are a promising approach for reducing disparities in academic performance.

Developed by a team of experts in social work, education, and public health, the Trauma-Informed Programs and Practices for Schools (TIPPS) framework doesn’t replace individualized or group interventions for students who are struggling in school. Rather, TIPPS guides efforts to transform schools into safe, nurturing, and inclusive learning environments that strengthen relationships and provide opportunities for all students and school staff to learn skills for resilience and positive coping (Herrenkohl et al., 2021).

The highly collaborative TIPPS framework can be used in any setting—from individual classrooms to entire school districts—and is intended to be scalable, sustainable, and tailored to the local culture and context of schools.



“

TIPPS is not a curriculum or program to implement; rather, it is a framework that schools can implement through various programs and practices to create a trauma-informed school environment.

—Michigan School Health Coordinator and TIPPS Partner

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## TIPPS Core Pillars

There is no one way for schools to become trauma informed, but certain approaches are known to work. Informed by more than two decades of research, we have developed 10 key recommendations—the Core Pillars—for developing a trauma-informed education environment. These Core Pillars can be implemented at a classroom, school, or district level and can be tailored to the specific setting. Although these pillars were developed for schools, they also apply to other environments—such as the home and in child welfare and juvenile justice settings—where children should feel safe, respected, and valued.



### 1. Ensure Safe Communities

Safe and nurturing environments establish a secure base for children. When students feel safe and cared for at school, they perform better on academic tasks and are less likely to become frustrated or angry when they encounter challenges.



### 2. Increase Awareness of Trauma

Understanding the signs and symptoms of trauma in students is essential to help them heal and become resilient to the adversities they encounter. Awareness leads to insights that deepen empathy and compassion.



### 3. Increase Awareness of Biases

Implicit bias and stereotypes can affect student achievement and undermine efforts to strengthen relationships and build community. For students to feel safe and secure, school professionals must learn about and counteract implicit biases, particularly about student performance and conduct.



### 4. Build Community

Strong communities rest on foundations of safety, trust, compassion, and respect for differences. To build community, school professionals must actively and consistently work to strengthen relationships, support and empower students, and be more responsive to the needs of all students.



### 5. Develop Positive Relationships

In trauma-informed schools, students and adults feel appreciated and valued for who they are and what they bring to the school community. To model positive relationships, school professionals must understand how their own actions affect others and avoid practices that undermine students' confidence.



## 6. Reduce Punitive Discipline

The use of punitive discipline—such as calling students out—can undermine students' self-confidence and motivation to learn. Measures such as suspension can worsen behavior and increase the likelihood of even more problematic outcomes for some students. Skillful de-escalation of conflict and use of restorative practices are alternatives to punitive discipline that also help students strengthen self-regulation and conflict resolution skills.



## 7. Communicate & Reinforce Expectations

Setting high yet achievable goals for students motivates performance and builds self-efficacy. Students are more likely to perform well when they are expected to do well and made to feel like their goals are within reach. If rules and expectations are unclear or poorly and inconsistently enforced, teaching and learning will suffer.



## 8. Avoid Deficit Thinking

Students can internalize deficit language, which undermines their self-confidence and motivation to learn. Communicating clear, positive, affirming messages that reflect confidence in students' abilities and a desire to see them succeed are fundamental to building and maintaining strong relationships and healthy school communities.



## 9. Incorporate Social-Emotional Skills

Trauma-informed schools incorporate teaching about social-emotional skills and positive coping to promote resilience. These include critical thinking and problem-solving skills. School professionals must be competent at modeling these skills for their students.



## 10. Create Supports

Although school- or systems-wide practices that support all students should be the foundation of trauma-informed schools, additional interventions should be available to students who need more support. The effective use of selective interventions for students requires schools to develop protocols for assessing and quickly acting on student issues and concerns. Partnering with community agencies to provide wraparound services can bring needed expertise into schools.

Find the rationale for each pillar, practice guidelines, and additional resources on the TIPPS website.

Learn More about the Core Pillars  
>> [tipps.ssw.umich.edu/10-core-pillars/](https://tipps.ssw.umich.edu/10-core-pillars/)  
>> [tipps.ssw.umich.edu/tools](https://tipps.ssw.umich.edu/tools)

## Resources

When we transform schools into safe, nurturing, and inclusive learning environments through trauma-informed programs and practices, we can improve well-being for all students and change the life trajectories of those who have experienced trauma.

We are here to help. Whether you're an educator, an administrator, a parent, or a student, we encourage you to share this resource with others and advocate for trauma-informed programs and practices in your school. You can also begin exploring and practicing the 10 Core Pillars yourself. The TIPPS team at the University of Michigan School of Social Work is available to help you implement trauma-informed practices in your school or district, including providing information sessions, training, and implementation support.



Visit our website for additional information, tools, and resources  
[tipps.ssw.umich.edu](https://tipps.ssw.umich.edu)



Subscribe to our newsletter to stay up to date on the latest science, training, and tools to support trauma-informed practices in education.

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For more information or support, contact the TIPPS team.  
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We're committed to transforming education to be more responsive to the needs of kids and families and creating equitable school environments where all students can thrive. Reducing the effects of trauma and building resilience through trauma-informed education practices is a powerful way to achieve lasting, systemic change."

—Todd Herrenkohl, TIPPS Director

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# Trauma-Informed Programs and Practices for Schools

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