

# TRAUMA-INFORMED TEACHING

## HOW CAN WE DESIGN CLASSROOMS TO BE INCLUSIVE FOR STUDENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED TRAUMA?

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WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

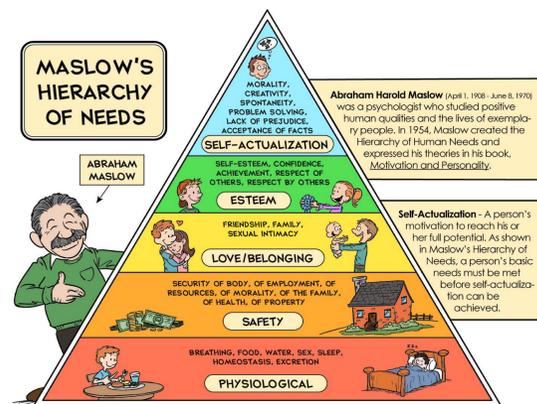
### TPEP CRITERION

**Criterion 5:** The teacher fosters and manages a safe and inclusive learning environment.

**Descriptor:** The teacher fosters and manages a safe and inclusive learning environment that takes into account: physical emotional and intellectual well-being.

### INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Trauma can be defined as a psychological, emotional (and even physiological) response to an event or an experience that is deeply distressing or disturbing. For research purposes, the term “trauma” will refer to anything listed on the Adverse Child Experience (ACE) Model. This includes physical, sexual, and/or verbal abuse. It also includes physical/emotional neglect, a family member who is depressed or diagnosed with another mental illness, a family member who is addicted to alcohol or another substance, a family member who is in prison, witnessing a mother being abused, and losing a parent to separation, divorce, or death (American SPCC, 2022).



### MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

Maslow describes human motivation by a list of needs that is represented as a pyramid. The most basic needs are at the bottom. As one moves up the pyramid, the needs become increasingly complex (Maslow, 1943).

The presence of trauma in a student's life can hinder even their most basic needs of being met. If a student does not have their basic physiological or safety needs met, success in the classroom will be extremely difficult.

### WHO IS IMPACTED BY TRAUMA?

Adverse childhood experiences impacts students across all socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds.

- 61% of individuals reported that they had experienced a minimum of one type of ACE in their childhood (CDC, 2022).
- In Washington State, high ACE scores disproportionately impacts historically marginalized populations including American Indian/Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, girls/women, and individuals with low socioeconomic status (WDOH, 2018).

### HOW DOES TRAUMA AFFECT OUR STUDENTS?

#### Mental Health

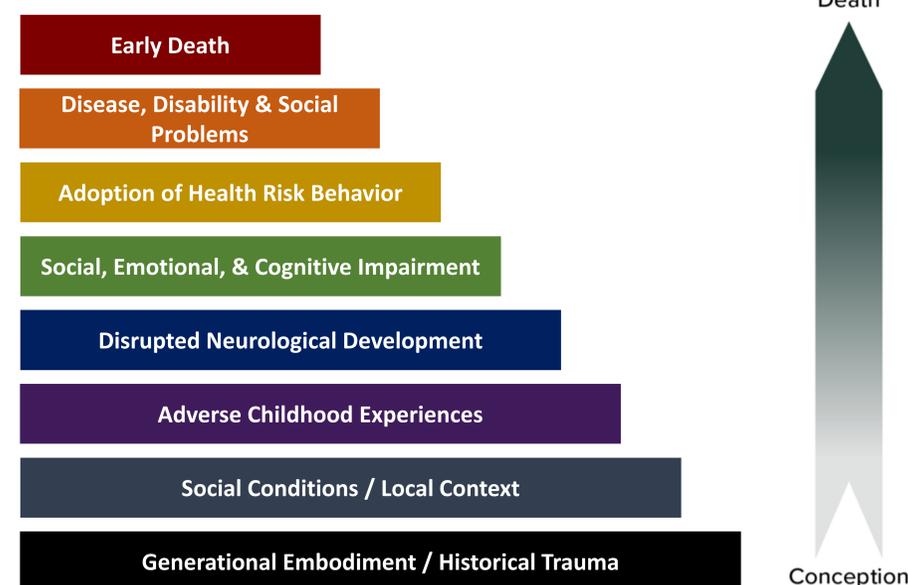
ACEs can change the physiological structure of the brain bring about “toxic stress” which leaves an individual with the inability to properly regulate their own stress response in a healthy manner. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) have demonstrated increased risk of depression, anxiety, aggression, suicide risk, personality disorders, behavior disorders, and substance abuse (Nurius et al., 2015).

#### Academic Performance

Trauma can undermine many skills that are crucial for learning, including the development of language and communication skills, the ability to organize and remember new information, and reading comprehension. Students coping with trauma may experience intrusive thoughts or flashbacks that prevent them from paying attention in class, studying, or focusing during timed assignments (MHA, 2021).

#### Physical Health

In the original ACEs study of nearly 17,500 people in the United States, it was found that there is a strong graded relationship between the breadth of exposure to abuse or household dysfunction during childhood and multiple risk factors for several of the leading causes of death in adults (Felitti et al., 1998) (See figure below).



Mechanism by which Adverse Childhood Experiences Influence Health and Well-being Throughout the Lifespan

### IMPLEMENTATION OF TRAUMA-INFORMED TEACHING

#### OSPI Recommended Strategies + Examples (Echo, 2018):

- 1. Create safety within the classroom**
  - Set up a “Calming Corner” in your classroom.
  - Be informed of students 504s and IEPs and make necessary accommodations.
  - Prioritize inclusivity, cultural responsiveness, and accessibility in classroom design. Utilize Universal Design for Learning (UDL)!
  - Limit exclusionary practices such as punitive discipline and excluding children from the classroom.
- 2. Help regulate the nervous system**
  - Teach students to recognize physiological responses to stress (increased heart rate, faster breathing, etc.)
  - Teach coping strategies (counting to 10, deep breathing, etc.).
  - Remove the student from a stressful situation to a different more approachable task; Also known as “Changing the Channel”.
- 3. Build a connected relationship**
  - Let students know through words and actions that they matter to you. Take interest in their interests, attend student events, give sincere compliments, and ask for their opinions.
  - As a teacher, understand that behavior is a symptom of a larger problem, not the problem itself.
- 4. Support development of a coherent narrative**
  - Understand that complex trauma can distort a student's sense of time and self.
  - Provide a predictable structure in your classroom with routines.
- 5. Practice ‘power with strategies’**
  - Utilize student choice and show that you value their input.
  - Avoid power struggles. It's not teacher vs. student!
- 6. Build social emotional and resiliency skills**
  - Incorporate SEL curriculum into classroom routines.
  - Use language and practices to promote a growth mindset with students.
- 7. Foster post-traumatic growth**
  - Teach students that although they cannot control their situation, they can control their responses.
  - Establish an understanding with a child that they can find purpose and meaning. This is fostered through building healthy relationships, problem-solving meaningful tasks, and establishing self-control skills.

#### ADDITIONAL RESOURCE ON TRAUMA-INFORMED TEACHING



#### REFERENCES

