

TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE IN SECONDARY EDUCATION: SUPPORTING YOUNG PEOPLE WITH EXPERIENCES OF TRAUMA

Young people who have experienced trauma, loss, separation, disrupted relationships or care may sometimes find aspects of school more difficult. This will look different for every young person. Some may be very open about their experiences, while others may not want to talk about them at all.

Adults do not need to know the full story to provide helpful support.

A calm, predictable and respectful approach can help young people feel safe, build trust and remain engaged in learning.

THINGS YOU MIGHT NOTICE

Secondary pupils encounter difficult themes across the curriculum. In English, for example, texts may include family breakdown, loss, bereavement, abuse, violence, neglect, rejection or abandonment.

You might want to:

- read through particularly sensitive material before teaching it
- provide some context before introducing difficult content
- avoid asking pupils to share personal experiences in order to participate
- keep discussion focused on the text, characters or subject matter
- offer an alternative way of completing the learning where appropriate.

For example, rather than:

"Have you ever experienced losing someone?"

you could ask:

"How does the writer present the character's experience of loss?"

This allows pupils to explore difficult themes without being expected to disclose something personal.

ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Potentially sensitive themes can arise in many subjects.

English: loss, family relationships, abuse, violence, rejection and bereavement.

History: war, slavery, genocide, persecution, violence and displacement.

PSHE/RSHE: relationships, consent, abuse, pregnancy, family life, mental health and substance misuse.

RE: death, suffering, beliefs, relationships and persecution.

Geography: migration, refugees, conflict, poverty and natural disasters.

Art & Drama: identity, family, childhood, memory and emotionally intense role-play.

PE: changing rooms, physical contact, body image, competition and being observed or judged.

This does not mean avoiding difficult or important subjects.

It may simply be worth considering:

"Can we explore this topic without requiring young people to disclose, revisit or act out personal experiences?"

A DIFFERENT WAY TO THINK ABOUT IT

When a young person is finding something difficult, rather than only asking:

"Why won't they do this?"

consider:

"What might help this young person feel safe enough to engage?"

A HELPFUL APPROACH

Be curious

Care experience or trauma does not tell us everything about a young person. Get to know the individual.

Keep expectations high

Being trauma-informed is not about making learning easier or excusing behaviour. It is about considering what support may help a young person meet expectations.

Offer appropriate choice

Where possible, allow different ways to engage with the learning without reducing the learning objective.

Be predictable and consistent

Clear routines, expectations and follow-through can help build trust.

Notice and respond

A change in behaviour may be worth noticing, particularly if it is out of character. Follow your school's usual pastoral and safeguarding procedures where concerns arise.

Repair relationships

A difficult interaction does not have to define the relationship. Young people benefit from knowing that adults can remain calm, fair and supportive even when things go wrong.

We cannot remove every potential trigger or difficulty from a school environment.

What we can do is create classrooms where young people experience consistency, respect, choice, belonging and high expectations.

Sometimes, these everyday experiences provide an important foundation for learning.