

TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE · ALL GRADES

Trauma-Informed Teaching

A one-page introduction

What it is

Trauma-informed teaching is an approach that recognises: • Many children in any class have lived through events that affect how their nervous systems work • Behaviour that looks like 'naughtiness' is often a **STRESS RESPONSE** — fight, flight, freeze, fawn • Standard discipline approaches often make these children worse, not better • Predictability, relationships, and emotional safety are the foundations of learning It's not a programme or a script — it's a lens. Once you start seeing children through this lens, your responses change.

What it isn't

Trauma-informed practice is NOT: • A reason to abandon expectations or boundaries (children with trauma need **MORE** structure, not less) • A diagnosis (you can't tell who has trauma; you teach as if many children might) • A free pass for behavior (accountability still matters) • Soft (it's actually harder than punitive practice) • A programme you can buy (it's a way of teaching) Done well, it makes classrooms calmer, more predictable, and more humane. Children with trauma backgrounds do better. Other children do better too.

The four shifts

From 'what's wrong with you?' to 'what happened to you?'

When a child is dysregulated, the question isn't 'why are you being naughty?' — it's 'what's making your nervous system respond like this?' Behavior is information, not a moral failure.

From compliance to safety

Standard discipline aims for compliance. Trauma-informed practice aims for safety first — physical, relational, emotional. Compliance follows safety. Without safety, compliance is performance under threat.



From punishment to repair

Punishment teaches a child their relationship with you is conditional. Repair teaches them relationships survive mistakes. For children whose home relationships have been unreliable, this is transformative.

From individual blame to systemic understanding

Trauma is rarely the fault of the child experiencing it. It's the result of things done TO them, or AROUND them. The work isn't to fix the child — it's to make the environment one where they can heal.

Why this matters in your class

Estimates vary, but research suggests:

- 1 in 6 children have experienced 4+ ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) by age 12
- Children in care, refugee children, bereaved children all carry elevated trauma load
- Many children have experienced things adults wouldn't recognise — domestic upheaval, parental mental illness, neglect, witnessed violence
- The effects show up in school: dysregulation, attachment difficulties, hyper-vigilance, shut-down

In any class of 30, you almost certainly have children whose behavior is shaped by trauma. Knowing what to look for, and what helps, transforms what happens in your classroom.

What to read next

If this is new territory, three places to start:

- 'The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog' by Bruce Perry — accessible introduction to the science
- 'Better Than Carrots or Sticks' by Dominique Smith and others — practical school applications
- Bessel van der Kolk's 'The Body Keeps the Score' — the research foundation (denser, more clinical)

For schools wanting to go deep: research the work of Karen Treisman (UK-based), Lori Desautels (US-based), and the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard.

