

Trauma-Informed Discipline Response and Behavior System

Objective: Schools will be able to develop appropriate discipline responses and proactive practices that successfully support students to maintain positive behavior while recognizing trauma-related causal factors and minimizing opportunities for re-traumatization.

Key Concepts: Student behavior that is challenging may be related to traumatic stress responses. To be effective at maintaining a safe and supportive learning environment for all students and staff, schools should utilize trauma-informed disciplinary policies and practices that avoid re-traumatization, reduce potential escalation of difficult behavior and are embedded in a system of positive behavior supports.

What Do We Mean by Trauma-Informed Discipline Response and Trauma-Informed Behavior System?

Trauma-informed discipline responses recognize that when students and staff feel consciously or unconsciously unsafe, the brain-body response interferes with decision-making and self-regulation. This can cause or exacerbate challenging and undesirable behaviors. Students who have experienced trauma may be particularly likely to experience dysregulated emotions and behavior in school settings, including poor concentration and difficulty staying on task, disruptive behavior, and even verbal and physical aggression towards peers or staff.

Their automatic self-protective postures may appear to be defensive or aggressive. Common staff responses, including bus drivers, classroom teachers and instructors, counselors and administrators, often escalate the situation, while trauma-informed responses seek to contain or calm the situation as well as teach the student to accept responsibility and use more appropriate behavior. Trauma-informed discipline systems recognize these connections between trauma exposure, student behavior and staff responses and recognizes the value of promotion, prevention and early intervention in the behavior cycle.

Trauma-informed discipline systems work at multiple levels to promote positive behavior supports, prevent behavior problems through early recognition and early intervention, and provide interventions that support student and staff self-regulation to promote executive functioning for problem-solving and learning. Students are more able to learn right from wrong, develop empathy and compassion, and regulate themselves to prevent and recover from disruptive behaviors.

What Does the Literature Say About Trauma-Informed Discipline in Schools?

Reports of reductions in office behavior referrals, in-school suspension, and out-of-school suspensions after implementation of trauma-informed practices that include positive behavior supports and non-exclusionary disciplinary responses are noted across practice and empirical literature (Baroni, et al., 2016; Herrenkohl, et al., 2019; Stevens, 2013a; Stevens 2013b; Stevens, 2012). Evaluation of the Healthy Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools (HEARTS) program reported a 32% decrease in office discipline referrals the first year, with an 87% decrease after five years. Incidents involving physical aggression diminished as well, 43% in year one, and 86% over the five years, and suspension rates decreased by 95% over five years (Dorado et al, 2016). Trauma-informed programs also have been found to reduce challenging behaviors in young children (Holmes, et al, 2015). Similarly, research also has noted the limitations and potential hazards of the “punishment paradigm” as suppressing rather than changing behavior (Blodgett & Dorado, 2019).

Support for the positive impact of trauma-informed practices on behavior also is found in literature on specific programming aligned with trauma-informed principles. Both Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) have been demonstrated to reduce office discipline referrals (Durlak, et al., 2011; Hoover, 2019). Trauma-informed programs such as conscious discipline have demonstrated measurable improvements in school climate, aggression, readiness to learn and “at-risk” status (Conscious Discipline, 2018). A review of the literature also noted that implementation of restorative justice or restorative practices demonstrated reduced use of exclusionary practices, and decreased incidents of violence (Fronius, et al., 2016).

Another body of research examines specific elements of traditional discipline, including seclusion, physical restraint and zero tolerance. Physical restraint and seclusion are not trauma-informed practices, and should be used only in the rare occasion of imminent danger to students or staff consistent with [704 KAR 7:160](#). The Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders (CCBD) states, “there is no research whatsoever indicating that restraint functions as a therapeutic procedure” (CCBD, 2020, p. 57) and cautions that seclusion can be overused, misapplied and disproportionately implemented, and used as a mechanism to remove students subjectively deemed undesirable (based on race, ethnicity, behavior, gender identity, sexual orientation, etc.) by staff (CCBD, 2009). Extensive research has pointed to connections between exclusionary discipline practices and subsequent risk for dropout, substance abuse, and juvenile justice engagement (Skiba, et al., 2014; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2019; Blodgett & Dorado, 2019; Joseph, et al. 2020).

Zero tolerance policies are not conceptually aligned with trauma-informed approaches by responding to all circumstances in the exact same way, without regard for underlying causality or effect of systems on behavior. The American Psychological Association (APA) Zero Tolerance Task Force conducted a thorough review of the literature and concluded “zero tolerance has not been shown to improve school climate or school safety ... has not proven an effective means of improving student behavior, [and] ... zero tolerance policies as applied appear to run counter to our best knowledge of child development” (2008).

Research on disproportionate application of school discipline to students who are Black and Brown, as well as those with special education needs also points to the need for a more trauma-informed approach. The APA Zero Tolerance Task Force found that zero tolerance policies failed to remove bias and disproportionate application of discipline to minority students (2008) despite assertions they would promote consistent disciplinary response. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 2019 report found students with disabilities are approximately twice as likely to be suspended, and students of color are suspended and expelled more than their White peers, including for the same offenses, and that those punishments are harsher and longer (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2019).

Corporal punishment is antithetical to trauma-informed principles and values of safety, trust, collaboration, mutuality and equity. Corporal punishment practices themselves also can inflict emotional and physical trauma on students, and re-traumatize students who experienced abuse at home. By seeking to deliberately inflict pain on a student with inherently less power than the adult meting out the punishment, corporal punishment would be classified as assault and battery in most other contexts, and sends the confusing message that physical force and infliction of pain are appropriate means of settling differences or interpersonal conflicts, even when use of physical force is precisely the behavior being punished.

Data reveal that students with identified disabilities, and students who are Black and Brown, experience corporal punishment at higher rates than their White counterparts (Gershoff & Font, 2016; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2019).

Research indicates that corporal punishment may contribute to the “school-to-prison pipeline” by increasing risk for student involvement in the juvenile justice system, and increases risk for perpetration of later dating violence (Temple, Choi, Rueter, Taylor, Madigan & Scott, 2017) and is correlated to later development of mental health and substance use disorders (Afifi, Mota, Dasiewicz, Macmillan & Sareen, 2012). Corporal punishment has not only been correlated to later deleterious behavior, but fails to correct behavior in the moment: it fails to engage students in problem-solving based on logical thinking and executive functioning; fails to promote empathy or compassion; reinforces defensive and emotional reactions that more frequently escalate problem behaviors; fails to improve classroom behavior; and may exacerbate problem behavior (Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2003). Schools that allow corporal punishment fail to create the positive

climate and culture critical for strong student outcomes, and actually create a climate that re-traumatizes students who have experienced physical abuse. Corporal punishment can impede learning and school performance by negatively impacting brain development, verbal capacity and executive functioning, such as problem-solving (Durrant & Ensom, 2012).

A 2016 letter from U.S. Secretary of Education John B. King summarized the concerns about corporal punishment, noting that every major professional organization for providers of child health and behavioral health is opposed to corporal punishment, including the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), the Society for Adolescent Medicine (SAM), the American Psychological Association (APA), and the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). In addition, national education organizations including the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) oppose use of corporal punishment in schools, and the practice already is prohibited in all Head Start programs, schools managed by the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), U.S. military training facilities, U.S. prisons and most juvenile detention facilities.

What is clear is that the lingering allowance of corporal punishment in school settings is, indeed, an outlier in a society that has banned its use in nearly all other contexts. Finally, the case against corporal punishment must rest on the absence of data to demonstrate its effectiveness at altering and improving behavior, and there is no evidence to support its use.

Trauma-informed practices in schools and districts demands trauma-informed approaches to discipline and altering behavior. And, such approaches cannot include use of seclusion and restraint, rigid zero tolerance rules or corporal punishment (Executive Office of the President, 2016).

School Discipline and the 4 Rs

Realize	Realize the cause of the challenging behavior may be connected to past or current traumatic experiences.
Recognize	Recognize the signs of traumatic stress in challenging behaviors and responses.
Respond	Respond using the “connect, then redirect” approach: first calm the brain-body reaction, then engage the student in problem-solving.
Resist Re-Traumatization	Resist re-traumatizing the student by avoiding use of seclusion and restraint, minimizing trauma triggers and creating psychological as well as physical safety

How Can Schools Create Trauma-Informed Discipline Responses?

Creating trauma-informed discipline responses can be guided by applying the six elements of trauma-informed care: safety, trustworthiness and transparency, peer support, collaboration and mutuality, empowerment, voice and choice and cultural, historical and gender issues. These elements will create the most positive, trauma-informed school climate and culture to promote positive behaviors and prevent disruptions, and they should also be applied to any and all disciplinary interactions that are needed with students.

Safety

Trauma-informed disciplinary responses must always start with maintaining psychological and physical safety for the student. Physical safety should ensure the least restrictive environment and avoid use of seclusion and restraint. Attend to the location of where you are meeting with the student, where you are sitting in relation to the student, whether the door is open or closed, the light and other environmental features to enhance a feeling of safety for the student.

Trauma reminders can compromise a student's perception of safety. Staff and students should always attend to any patterns of dysregulation to identify sources that may be trauma reminders in the student's schedule or interactions. Once potential reminders are identified, staff should work with students on ways to promote self-regulation and/or reduce exposure, as appropriate. Tools such as a Trauma-Informed Safety Plan that identify possible trauma reminders, early warning signs of dysregulation and calming strategies to promote regulation can be helpful to prevent disruption and identify effective ways to support students to be able to calm when dysregulation occurs.

Psychological safety is enhanced by using a neutral and calm tone of voice, addressing the student with respect, avoiding sarcasm, using active listening strategies and not making assumptions about what happened. These strategies should always be part of the universal implementation of trauma-informed classroom and schools, and are critical when responding to students exhibiting challenging behaviors in front of others. Addressing problem behaviors is often most successful one-on-one, and psychological safety remains the essential foundation of a trauma-informed response.

Students feel more psychologically safe when they feel in control of their emotions, thoughts and behaviors. Allowing students a chance to self-regulate prior to addressing the disciplinary consequence allows them to calm their brain and body threat-response activation. There are several ways to enable students to calm through self-regulation before talking if you are meeting with a student individually:

- Create a minute of quiet while you answer an email or attend to something else at your desk. You can tell the student, "Give me just a second to wrap this up so we won't be interrupted." It may be helpful to have something for them to do with their hands while

they are waiting, e.g. stress balls, playdough, something to draw or doodle with, Etch A Sketch.

- Take a few deep breaths or use another calming strategy with the student before launching into any discussion – remember, it is often helpful for you to do this with the student rather than directing them to do it on their own.
- Allow the student to get a drink of water or have a glass of water in your office.
- Allow the student to wash hands or face, especially if sweaty, bloody or dirty.
- Walk with the student in the hall or outside to discharge the extra stress-response hormones that may be coursing through their bodies.

Psychological safety also is enhanced when students know what to expect from a consistent, predictable disciplinary process that is known to students, families and staff as described as part of building trust. Start by explaining to the student how the process will work as a means of creating safety and promoting trust. Student physical and psychological safety is undermined by any use of corporal punishment as part of school discipline.

Trustworthiness and Transparency

Establishing trust is closely related to safety, and depends in large part on transparency. School expectations for behavior and conduct, and consequences for not adhering to expectations, should be well-known to all students, families and staff. Behavioral expectations should be couched as positively as possible, explaining the ways the school promotes positive behavior, resources for prevention and early intervention if students are struggling, and the expectations of both students and staff at all response tiers. When a student is referred to the office for a behavioral concern, always review what will happen with as many details as possible. For example:

“Before we get started, I want to tell you what we’re going to do. First, we’re going to take a few minutes to regroup – you can get a drink, wash your hands, draw, or just sit. I’m going to take a couple of breaths and clear my head. Then I’m going to ask you to tell me what happened; then I’ll tell you what I heard. Then we will figure out what we do next.”

Promoting transparency by taking time to explain the process can occur even when the situation and consequences are serious. Consider this recollection from Principal Jim Sporleder of Lincoln High School demonstrating the value of taking time to create psychological safety and promote trust and transparency (a pseudonym is used):

“We still had to charge her for the assault, but because she was so cooperative, I let her know we weren’t going to handcuff her to take her in. The school resource officer (SRO) came in and processed with her everything that was going to happen. Before they took her in to JJC, the SRO expressed his appreciation for her

cooperation. He repeated that he would not handcuff her, but she was still going to have to go through the whole court regarding the assault ...

“When Billy retells this story today, she always expresses how the simple offer of a glass of water and the kindness she received when she was brought into the office changed everything about how she was able to face the consequences of her actions. This level of kindness and respect, even though she was ‘guilty’ of the assault, changed how Billy was able to move forward.” (Sporleder & Forbes, 2016, pp. 38-39)

Trust and transparency also are reinforced by consistent and equitable disciplinary processes and practices. It is imperative that the disciplinary response *process* is consistent each time, and across all students (i.e. students talk with an administrator, are given a chance to share their experience, and have an opportunity to participate in problem-solving with school personnel.) Using a consistent process ensures that while outcomes or consequences may vary in response to the individual situation, they always are equitable: consequences must always be proportional to the nature of the offense, the circumstances of the situation, the developmental level of the student, and the past history of concerns.

Peer Support

Effective promotion of positive behaviors and prevention of challenging behaviors are enhanced through healthy peer interactions and supports. Healthy peer collaboration and communication should be strongly supported for all students, including those who are struggling. The response to isolate them and exclude them from peer engagement does not teach them how to manage their behavior in groups, and can be counterproductive. Peer engagement for students who struggle with self-regulation in groups may need to be adapted to meet their needs (e.g. start by pairing them with one other student, then a small group and gradually increase the amount of time for group work).

School discipline traditionally has been framed as an authoritative response by staff imposed on students. Restorative justice models demonstrate the power of peer accountability. In these models, justice is effectively delivered through community that promotes responsibility by each member for their actions. Restorative justice models demonstrate the preventive power of peer support through the use of healing circles that engender peer respect, empathy, compassion and perspective-taking, and promote parental recognition of the benefit of community healing and accountability by including caregiver permission for participation.

Through peer support, restorative justice models enable healing relationships with peers and adults to enhance repair and rehabilitation. Traditional approaches to school discipline that remove students from peers through out-of-school and in-school suspensions or diversion programs not only isolate students, but inhibit the powerful positive impact of peer support in shaping prosocial behavior and conduct.

Collaboration and Mutuality

Students should be a part of the process of setting behavioral expectations, and evaluating and assessing the impacts of their behaviors on others, as well as identifying the appropriate and proportional consequences in response to problem behavior. Student engagement in these activities promotes responsibility and accountability for their actions, and enhances the five core competencies of social emotional learning and builds capacity for empathy and compassion. Promoting student collaboration and mutuality does not require schools to give student perspectives equal weight, but does allow the student perspective to inform consequences.

Collaboration and mutuality also occurs in the context of developing individual behavior plans for prevention and response strategies. Students and families should be active partners in developing these plans, which also may include trauma-informed components such as trauma-informed safety plans.

Communication to support collaboration and mutuality depends on active listening, respectful consideration and refraining from judging student perspectives. Consider these seven (7) questions to gather facts in a nonjudgmental manner and enhance collaboration and mutuality:

7 Questions That Change School Discipline

What happened?

What part did you play in it?

How did it happen?

How were you affected by what you did?

What can you do to repair the harm?

Who else was affected by what you did?

What do you need to make it right?



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Empowerment, Voice and Choice

One of the hallmarks of experiencing trauma is the sense of powerlessness, and feelings of powerlessness often serve as a root cause of challenging behavior in school settings. Opportunities to promote student voice, choice and empowerment are ways to offer students some level of control and counter the perception of absolute powerlessness. Choices about small things provide students with an immediate sense of control, and can occur through offering any of the following choices to students:

- Whether to meet in an office or walk and talk;
- Where to sit in the office;
- Office door open or closed;
- Option of something to drink, washing hands, etc.;
- Order of talking: let them decide if they tell you their version of events first or you tell them what you heard/saw first; and
- What adult they wish to work with to address the problem (e.g., principal, counselor, social worker, specific teacher).

Student empowerment through having a voice in disciplinary responses often elicits greater acceptance of responsibility and accountability than consequences imposed by outside forces. This enhances the opportunity to learn from mistakes that disciplinary responses should provide. Student empowerment also is enhanced by pointing out areas of strength or appropriate behavior. For example, if the student calms down, apologizes or asks how others are doing, these positive behaviors should be affirmed through specific, targeted affirmations (e.g. “I appreciate you calming down so we can talk” or “Thanks for helping me to understand your perspective”).

Student empowerment at an individual level also comes from a focus on learning ways to enhance self-regulation and manage behavior. The sense of competence students gain from successfully implementing behavior plans is a valuable preventive component of the trauma-informed discipline system and a powerful means of empowerment to promote self-efficacy.

Student voice should also be included in the development of school and district discipline policies. Student representatives from a diversity of student perspectives (race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, academic performance, etc.) is essential and demands that there be more than one token student representative to these policy-making committees.

Student and family input also should be solicited through periods of public comment of draft policies in ways that are genuine, avoid tokenism and go beyond performative gestures. Students should be the drivers to establish classroom-level positive behavior rules with guidance from teachers.

Cultural, Historical and Gender Issues

High rates of disparities in disciplinary responses for students with disabilities and students of color have been demonstrated across all age groups and geographical locations nationally and in Kentucky (Losen & Martinez, 2020; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2019; Welsh & Little, 2018). For example, while Black students make up 10.6% of the student population in Kentucky, they made up 58.5% of all out-of-school suspensions (KDE School Report Card 2018-19 data). It is especially important that students who are in Special Education, and students who are Black or Brown, trust consequences are equitable and comparable to consequences for White students being disciplined for similar offenses. Racial disparities in discipline have been tied to community bias (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019) and school staff must always check themselves and one another to avoid perpetuating systemically and structurally racist disciplinary responses.

Staff should be alert to micro-aggressions or other discriminations against students of color, with disabilities or who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender or Queer/Questioning (LGBTQ). These microaggressions may be the root of the behavioral problem, or may be embedded in traditional discipline responses and serve to escalate rather than calm challenging behavior.

Discipline policies and practices must utilize a consistent process of seeking to understand the problem within the framework of psychological safety, trust transparency, collaboration and

empowerment, and also must adopt the position of cultural humility to ensure staff are not expecting students to do something they have been taught is disrespectful. For example, some students may not be comfortable looking adults in the face, but looking at the floor does not mean they are not paying attention. Consequences must always be developmentally appropriate to meet the student's individual needs.

Discipline policies must avoid a "one size fits all" approach, and zero tolerance policies that do not allow for individualization in response to careful understanding of the specific situation should be avoided. For example, not all students who are exhibiting chronic tardiness require the same response actions. Some students may be chronically tardy because they don't want to come to school, or are simply not being accountable for themselves. For those students, a behavioral system of rewards for being on time and consequences for being tardy may be appropriate. Other students may be tardy because they are responsible for getting younger siblings off to school each morning, and want to be on time, but simply can't manage all their responsibilities. In that case, a behavioral change system is not appropriate, but working with the Family Resource and Youth Services Center (FRYSC) coordinator or the counselor to connect the family to additional supports may be warranted.

In both cases, a similar and consistent process for addressing the issue should be utilized:

1. The student is referred to the counselor, principal or assistant principal.
2. The staff member should clearly explain the school's concern (e.g. chronic tardiness).
3. The student should be asked to explain what is causing the tardiness, and the staff member should listen with full attention and in a non-judgmental manner, ask questions as appropriate, and refrain from making assumptions or jumping to conclusions.
4. The student and staff member should then explore all the possible options for addressing the problem, and make a plan that includes a timeline and process for checking in about how the plan is working. When students require additional supports, the staff member should be very clear in explaining the process and assisting the student and/or family in making those connections.
5. The staff member should clearly explain what will go on the student's record.
6. The staff member should always ask the student if there are any additional questions or concerns. A good practice is also to have the student explain the plan back in their own words to ensure full understanding and appreciation of the plan and next steps.

Recommendations for incorporating trauma-informed, race-centered approaches to promote equitable discipline response practices can be found in this [article](#) in *Children & Schools* describing an interprofessional framework.

Tips for Making School Discipline Response Systems Trauma-Informed

- Consider the discipline responses as one part of a system of positive behavior in schools.
- Include student voice in developing classroom, school and district discipline policies.
- Use non-judgmental tone of voice, language and expressions.
- Give the student time and space to calm physically, emotionally and cognitively. Use self-regulating, grounding and coping strategies. If the student has a Trauma-Informed Safety Plan, use calming strategies identified in the plan.
- Consider the student version of what happened. Don't tell them what happened, especially if you were not present.
- Listen actively: reflect back what you hear and acknowledge the student's perspective and feelings (you can do so without agreeing with their interpretation or response).
- Calmly share other versions of what happened or was observed. Offer this as an alternative rather than a dismissal of the student's perspective. Avoid conveying judgment about the events, and report them as facts in a neutral tone of voice. Avoid arguing with the student about what occurred, instead "agree to disagree."
- Offer choices whenever possible.
- Affirm positive behaviors, strengths and cooperation during the process and regarding the incident.
- Engage the student in the process of determining ways that they can repair any harm done (to peers, staff or property) and appropriate actions that promote accountability.
- Employ restorative practices and peer support.
- Focus consequences on ways to prevent, minimize and interrupt similar future problems.
- Ensure consequences are proportional to the current infraction and student cognitive, emotional and behavioral developmental levels. Cumulative infractions should be seen as an indication of needing more individualized response.
- Identify patterns of behavior to recognize possible trauma reminders or triggers such as people, places, time of day, level of tiredness or exhaustion, anxiety, fear, amount of structure, etc.
- Ensure the content and process of the disciplinary response are aware of and respect how differences (including culture, race, ethnicity, religion, ability, gender, sexual identification and sexual orientation) may inform the situation.
- Avoid use of exclusion, seclusion, restraint or corporal punishment.

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Additional Resources:

- Conscious Discipline: <https://consciousdiscipline.com/methodology/> and Conscious Discipline research findings: <https://consciousdiscipline.com/methodology/research/>
- Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders (2020), *CCBD's Position Summary on the Use of Physical Restraint Procedures in Educational Settings*, available at: https://higherlogicdownload.s3.amazonaws.com/SPED/bc40048c-cf24-4380-a493-273ff305ca3c/UploadedImages/Position_Statements/CCBD_Position_Paper_Restraint.pdf
- Early Childhood Education Resource from Multiplying Connections: <https://traumaawareschools.org/studentBehavior>
- Fix School Discipline Trauma Sensitive Strategies: <http://www.fixschooldiscipline.org/trauma/>
- National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (n.d.), 9. Guiding Questions for Policies and Procedures in *Building Trauma Sensitive Schools Training Package Handout Packet*. Available at: https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/sites/default/files/TSS_Building_Handout_Packet_ALL.pdf
- Restorative Justice:
 - What Teachers Need to Know about Restorative Justice: <https://www.weareteachers.com/restorative-justice/>
 - National Education Policy Institute, *The Starts and Stumbles of Restorative Justice: Where Do We Go from Here?*: https://nepc.colorado.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Revised%20PB%20Gregory_0.pdf
- Trauma-Aware Schools Student Behavior: <https://traumaawareschools.org/studentBehavior>