

## how a trauma-informed perspective supports social and emotional well-being for all children

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To be trauma-informed is to also understand social and emotional well-being.

Social and emotional well-being is largely about our capacity for *regulation* and what we have come to believe about ourselves, relationships and the world around us (our *core beliefs*).



If, particularly during the time from wombhood through early childhood, we have repeated experiences of caregivers helping us become more regulated (*co-regulation*) when we feeling particularly stressed (or dysregulated), we will be better able to regulate our strong emotions and level of stress.

If, particularly during the time from wombhood through early childhood, we have repeated experiences of caregivers who foster a sense of self-worth and a feeling safety in relationships, we are more likely to feel valued, competent, and to see others and the world as safe (our *core beliefs*).

These types of experiences create a space where infants and children feel seen and heard.

How we are in relationship to ourselves, others and the world around us, is a window not only into our life experience, notably our earliest ones, but also how we *understood* or *made meaning* of those experiences.

That meaning, whether we felt deserving of love, for example, or whether we felt good enough, is woven into our *core beliefs* that define so much of what we feel, think and do as older children and adults.

To the extent that our experience involved adversity, ‘how we are’ is also a window into understanding how we learned to respond to, or cope with, those experiences of adversity.

Trauma results from an experience or experiences that overwhelm our ability to cope with, and to make meaning of (in healthy ways) the traumatic experience(s). It derails social and emotional well-being.



When we talk about being overwhelmed, we are talking about being so stressed that we can’t calm, or *regulate* our level of stress or strong emotions and our nervous system shifts into fight, flight or freeze.

Trauma, then, affects the two key dimensions of social and emotional well-being. The first is our capacity for *regulation*, or our ability to calm ourselves when stressed. Even when the traumatic experience is over, anything that reminds us of that trauma, including things that might seem



inconsequential, can be potential triggers that can easily dysregulate us (it can feel like being back in the traumatic experience).

The second is the manner in which the trauma, our response at the time, and the way in which we made meaning of the experience, impacts our *core beliefs* about our self-worth, sense of safety, and how competent we feel.

Our capacity for regulation and our core beliefs further affect our capacity and desire to learn and explore, develop lasting and connected relationships, and to find meaning in our lives.

So, to be trauma-informed means that we understand:

- △ what trauma is (including an understanding of the role of trauma triggers or reminders)
- △ how widespread trauma is
- △ the way trauma can impact how we feel, what we think and how we behave through its impact on our capacity for *regulation* and its impact on our *core beliefs*
- △ how to be supportive of people who have had traumatic experiences (trauma-informed practice)



Trauma-informed practice for young children is about using this trauma-informed understanding to support children who have experienced trauma to feel safe, and about:

- ∞ seeing all behavior is a form of communication
- ∞ offering repeated *experiences* of connected relationships that are *co-regulating* and foster a sense of self-worth, safety and competence (*core beliefs*)
- ∞ creating a space where children feel *seen* and *heard*
- ∞ taking care not to compare, judge, minimize or negate anyone's experience
- ∞ noticing, being thoughtful about, and minimizing potential trauma reminders (triggers) that lead to dysregulation and acting out or acting in (fight, flight or freeze) behaviors



At the root of trauma-informed practice is our willingness to create a space where anyone who has experienced trauma, feels seen and heard. Yet we may want to consider adopting a trauma-informed perspective as a way of being in all of our work with infants, young children and families, and even all of our relationships.

“All our relationships” because at least two thirds of children have had at least one traumatic experience by the time they are 16 years old, and we don't always know what the child or adult in front of us has experienced.

“All our relationships” because everyone deserves to be seen and heard.

None of this is to negate or minimize anyone's experience of trauma, or challenges they may confront as a result of trauma.



It is to say that a trauma-informed perspective can be about treating all human beings respectfully. It can also help us gain insight into why anyone, ourselves included, feels, thinks and acts in the ways we do (the meaning behind behavior) through an understanding of *regulation* and *core beliefs*. This type of insight and self-awareness over time allows us to better support not only children who have experienced trauma, but all children.

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