



## The Trauma-Informed Teacher Tip Guide

*Developed by Becky Haas, Trauma-Informed Trainer & Organizational Coach*

### *Understanding Trauma and ACEs*

The [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#) provides the following: “trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances experienced or witnessed by an individual that amount to an overwhelming or life-changing effect on the individual’s well-being.”

Trauma affects people in numerous and individualized ways, such as health complications, distrust of people, institutions, and systems, and altered views of the world, beliefs, and spirituality.

Historical trauma is the cumulative and psychological wounding, over the lifespan and across generations, resulting from massive group trauma experiences. This form of trauma stems from an event affecting a group of people, and the consequences of the event affect generations to come, particularly as systems and institutions continue to inflict pain related to this event.

[Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\)](#) are a way to measure childhood experiences that can cause trauma. ACEs include events occurring during childhood such as experiencing or witnessing violence and parental separation. Research has linked ACEs as a risk factor to health disparities including health issues, mental illness, and addiction.

Since 1997, almost every state has completed the ACEs survey at least once with a cross-sample of their population. Consistent through all the surveys is the conclusion that ACEs are common. They exist across states, communities, cultures, races, geographical areas, socio-economic categories, and languages.

*“With appropriate supports and intervention, people can overcome traumatic experiences”  
(SAMHSA, 2014).*

### *Decoding Student Behavior: Is it Willful or Survival Behavior?*



Educators don't need to read a peer-reviewed article to know what their “gut” already tells them—that a student’s life outside of school matters and can significantly influence their behavior. However, it's important that teachers know how to identify when certain behaviors are a child's survival mechanisms. Understanding how to tell the difference between willful behaviors and survival behaviors helps teachers cultivate trauma-informed classrooms, establish supportive teacher-student relationships, and strengthen a sense of safety in students who may be experiencing ongoing stress or other forms of trauma. It also helps teachers identify students according to their character instead of by their survival behaviors.

## *Behaviors that can help identify trauma:*

- Shyness and difficulty engaging with others.
- Disproportionate reactions to setbacks and unexpected changes
- Trouble managing big emotions (extreme anger, excessive crying, etc.)
- Clinginess
- Difficulty transitioning from one activity to the next
- Forgetfulness
- Frequent complaints of headaches and stomachaches
- Difficulty focusing
- Lack of safety awareness
- Missed deadlines
- Poor academic performance
- Apathy and lack of effort
- Perfectionist tendencies
- Physical and/or verbal aggression

## *Upstairs and Downstairs Brain*



A very effective way to explain the brain to students is to tell them to think of their brain as a house with an upstairs and downstairs. This idea came from [\*The Whole-Brain Child\*](#), a book written by Dr. Dan Siegel and Tina Payne Bryson.

This simple illustration is effective for getting students to understand what is going on in their brains. Once you introduce the parts and functions of each floor, you can ask students to add characters to each floor that illustrate behaviors.

With this, you introduce the parts and functions of the thinking brain, which is the cortex or the "upstairs," and the feeling brain, which is the amygdala or the "downstairs."

The upstairs is logical, sensitive, problem-solving, and perceptive of other people's feelings, and is the adaptive floor of the house.

The downstairs is connected to strong emotions; it's the voice that keeps us safe and provides us with our survival instincts. The downstairs has only three responses: fight, flight, or freeze.

## *Moving Between the Brain Floors to Manage Behavior*

Similar to a flight of stairs or an elevator, navigating between the floors in the brain also requires a mode of transportation. This modality is comprised of the tools of *regulation*, *relation*, and *reason*. Using these tools with students will help them move from being dysregulated (downstairs/chaotic) to regulated (upstairs/calm).

*When a child is dysregulated, the first message to send is "you are safe."  
This can be done by using regulation strategies.*

## *Regulation Strategies:*

- Count backwards from ten to one.
- Take a deep breath through your nose, hold it, let it out your mouth. Repeat five times.
- Blow a pinwheel
- Shake a snow globe or glitter jar and watch until the snow or glitter has landed.

- Find objects buried in a gallon plastic jar filled halfway with sand. Do a body scan. Students stand or sit and close their eyes. Starting from the head, slowly describe parts of the body (forehead, eyebrows, nose, mouth, neck, shoulders, etc.) like a scan moving downward to the bottom of their feet. When you finish, ask students what they noticed in the scan.
- Color mindful coloring pages
- Squeeze a stress ball.

*The next message is, "I am here with you."  
This can be done through connection strategies.*

### *Relation/Connection Strategies:*

- Strengths Inventory: Draw a circle on paper and divide it into 8 triangle pie shapes. Outside the rim of each pie write the words, "Art," "Sports," "Community," "Spiritual," "Humor," and "Curiosity." Label two of them as "Other." When you conduct your inventory write down the student's responses. When you need a connection moment you can draw on this information (i.e., "How's your hockey team doing?" etc.)
- Assignments that allow students to share their experiences and interests.
- 2:10: The next 10 times you are with a particular student, give them 2 minutes to share anything important to them to build genuine connection.
- 5:1: Notice a student 5 times when they are on task for every 1 time you notice them not on task or misbehaving.
- Morning greeting: Celebrate each student at the beginning of each day with a greeting of their choice to create belonging.
- Check-in & check-out: Invite students to check in and out with you at the start and end of each class period or school day to learn if there's any way they need your support.
- Phone calls, texts, emails home to caregivers with good news

### *Reason*

Using these tools in the classroom is important because by doing so teachers can respond to a student's downstairs brain behaviors more effectively and empathetically and help them move to the regulated state of the upstairs brain. *Here you can work together to learn, create connections, problem solve, and much more!*

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This product was created by Becky Haas and our partners at the [Ohio Association of County Behavioral Health Authorities \(OACBHA\)](http://www.oacbha.org).

