

# Creating Authentic Safe Spaces

By Courtney Balacco and Anita Cellucci

**S**chool librarians can agree that the library offers an opportunity for a safe space for all students in our schools. At the heart of an effective school library program is the importance of individual understanding of each child. In recent years, the rates of students dealing with mental health issues have risen, boundaries between real and virtual lives have blurred, and technology has begun to be introduced into student lives much earlier. This alone offers reason enough to think about how our libraries are meeting the need for a comfortable, welcoming, personalized learning environment that takes the whole child into consideration. But, how do we actually create a safe environment? Ensuring that a place and space are actually safe is quite different from labeling that space as safe.

## Trauma Defined

Trauma can be defined as an event or series of events that are experienced as physically or emotionally harmful. These events can impart a chronic sense of fear, hypervigilance, and lack of safety upon students. The experience of trauma can be a brief or a longer term reaction to a single traumatic event, for example the development of post-traumatic stress disorder following a tragic car accident or exposure to a violent crime. Trauma can also be categorized as "complex trauma," and occurs when adverse events are repetitive or continuous over time, for example, repetitive exposure to domestic violence or chronic childhood abuse.

Traumatic stress alters the development and functioning of a student's brain, and in turn can result in negative impacts on learning as well as physical, social, and emotional health. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) is another common descriptor for events of childhood trauma. According to the National Survey of Children's Health, as reported by Child Trends (2018), in the United States 45% of children (or about 34 million) have had at least one ACE, and one in ten children has experienced three or more ACEs causing ongoing traumatic stress.



Exposure to trauma activates the survival mechanisms of the brain and dysregulates the nervous system. In response to a traumatic event, the sympathetic nervous system responsible for our "fight, flight, freeze" response becomes activated. As a child is exposed to chronic traumatic stress, the more easily their brain engages in survival mode and the sympathetic nervous system is put into overdrive. Over time, this stress response can engage even when there is no actual danger, and the child experiences their world as continually threatening. Children exposed to trauma often have difficulty understanding and expressing the distress they experience. These students may present with a variety of symptoms including irritability, agitation, hyperactivity, difficulty focusing and poor executive functioning, poor self-regulation, and difficulty forming relationships. Schools and school staff play a central role in the lives of children and as such are well suited to support students impacted by trauma. Given the preva-

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lence of students exposed to trauma, it is critical for educators to understand the impact and symptoms of trauma so that they can respond with empathy and compassion and create a safe learning environment for all.

## Trauma-Informed Practice

Trauma-informed practice offers critical tools, interventions, and strategies that will help foster interpersonal safety in our spaces.

An important aspect of integrating trauma-informed practice is to focus on the creation of this safe environment. Safety is essential for all students to feel connected, to be open to trusting others in the space, and to be willing to develop relationships with the adults they encounter in our libraries. Libraries can become a safe environment that helps students regulate their stress response. In order to create this environment, it is necessary that expectations are transparent, authentic, and compassionate. Fostering interpersonal safety begins with the development of trusting and predictable relationships. When interacting with young people who have experienced trauma, it is not only necessary but also important to our students' healing that we develop skills of relational interactions and positive approaches to engagement. Examining our own implicit bias is an integral aspect of building trust with students. Showing students that we are present in the interaction and interested in understanding their reactions with authenticity in our responses will enable a pathway to relationship building.

## Skillful Self-Disclosure

James Comer tells us: "No significant learning occurs without a significant relationship" (1995). This is even more true when supporting students impacted by trauma. We build relationships through sharing stories, through active learning about our students, and through deep listening. As humans, a natural form of connection grows from communicating our own shared experiences. As we build relationships with our students from a trauma-sensitive lens, it is critical for us to self-reflect and clarify our role as educators. Role clarity helps define the scope of our role and establish goals in relationships with our students. Well-defined roles and boundaries provide students with a clear sense of expectation and safety. So how do we connect in an authentic, empathetic way while also maintaining safe emotional boundaries for our students? One common approach is through skillful self-disclosure. In order for disclosure to be helpful, it requires careful thought. Skillful self-disclosure can have many benefits. It may decrease feelings of isolation, motivate our students toward positive change, and enhance student engagement. When making the choice to disclose, it is important for us to consider strategies that allow us to be most effective.

## Four Strategies for Skillful Self-Disclosure

*1. Before you disclose, remember boundaries create safety.*

Trauma impacts children's brain development as well as attachment to caregivers. Trauma in caregiver relationships can lead to confusion for children in understanding and defining their relationships. Children need caring adults to teach and model healthy relationships. Well-defined boundaries frame the relationship for students and build a foundation of trust.

*2. Ask yourself, how is this useful to the student?*

It is important to reflect upon what is motivating us to share. Are



we benefiting from the disclosure? Is the student? Many times we feel the urge to share, simply because we feel connected to our student's experience in the way we would with a family member, friend, or co-worker. In a student-educator relationship, our role is naturally different. Before sharing, ask yourself, how do I hope this student will benefit from what I want to share? Will this disclosure help build trust? Will it help guide the student toward achieving a goal?

### 3. *Would you be comfortable sharing your disclosure with an administrator or colleague?*

Even if you believe the disclosure could benefit your student, if you would not feel comfortable sharing the same information with a colleague or your administrator, you should refrain from sharing it. Is there another way to achieve the goal without sharing that specific piece of information?

### 4. *Can I achieve the same outcome without self-disclosure?*

We should consider whether or not we can obtain the same outcome for the student, without self-disclosing at all. Is it possible to validate the student's experience or feelings without sharing? Can you offer genuine reassurance that they are not alone, without sharing your personal story? Would your advice or guidance have the same impact without the disclosure?

Self-disclosure is one of many tools in our connections toolkit. It undoubtedly has a natural place in fostering trust, connection, and safety. Done thoughtfully, it can be part of creating a safe, connected, trauma informed community for students.

## Self Care

Learning about how to create an authentically safe environment and implementing the practice as a trauma-informed educator will require that we also focus on our self care. Caring and working with youth with trauma can lead to burnout, compassion fatigue, and vicarious trauma unless we are intentional about creating a self-care practice. Self care is a sustained way to ensure that a state of relaxation is reached on a consistent basis. This can look different for each individual, however, it should integrate elements of care for work, social, physical, emotional, and spiritual. In creating these rituals we ensure that our minds are in attunement with our bodies, thereby allowing true rest of our body and mind. It is also important to have a combination of relaxation and effort within our personal self care. For example, social time and a gratitude practice will take less effort than exercise, meditation practice, nutrition, and positive self talk but each of these are valuable to whole-self wellness.

Ensuring that our libraries are places where everyone in the community feels seen and comfortable requires that we understand the complexities of trauma, how to create authentically safe space, and that we are open to examining our own implicit biases as a way to help our students learn. Developing schools with trauma-sensitive programs, curriculum, and spaces, enables educators to reach each student where they are and to help them to develop pathways to healing.



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# Trauma-Informed School Libraries



By Meghan Harper

**T**rauma-informed education is focused on understanding how to engage, support, and respond to students who have been impacted by trauma. This approach is becoming more commonplace in schools as the benefits and successes are documented, and there are numerous relevant practices that school librarians can develop and adopt. First, for some background, in the whole school context, key principles of trauma-informed education include:

1. A shared understanding among all staff
2. Support for all children to feel safe physically, socially, emotionally, and academically
3. Addressing students' needs in holistic ways, accounting for relationships, self-regulation, academic competency, and physical and emotional well-being
4. Explicitly connecting students to the school community, providing multiple opportunities to develop and practice skills (Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative 2019).

The Centers for Disease Control (2019) suggest that more than one-half to two-thirds of children nationally experience trauma. Two out of three children will experience at least one traumatic event by the time they are eighteen. Multiple studies have attempted to identify the quantitative evidence of childhood trauma. However, accurately identifying the breadth and depth of the traumatic experiences of children is difficult because trauma is often not reported or underreported by both adults and children. Researchers suggest that in the long run it is better for all children to experience trauma-informed education:

It's risky to assume that our students haven't experienced trauma—according to a seminal study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, childhood trauma is far more pervasive than previously believed and is often invisible. And chat participants asserted that trauma-informed and SEL [social emotional learning] practices benefit all children, building critical skills like self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and an openness to teamwork and cooperation (Venet 2018).

The effects of trauma can manifest in a variety of visible ways and unfortunately in invisible ways as well. As described by Sam Himmelstein of the Center for Adolescent Studies, trauma can change the brain and thus, as a result, students can exhibit a decline in their ability to process information. Some common

characteristics of a child that has experienced trauma may include issues with

- Impulse control
- Skewed emotional responses
- Blaming others
- Decreased IQ and reading ability
- Lack of concentration
- Perceived inability to relate to others
- Perfectionism (Himmelstein 2016)

One of the most troubling aspects of trauma and its effects on students is the long-lasting negative impact on overall individual health and well-being. Research findings suggest childhood trauma, stress, and maltreatment and health directly correlate with adult quality of life. A seminal study known as the ACE Study or Adverse Childhood Experiences Study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Kaiser Permanente examined the effects of traumatic events longitudinally from child to adult. Key findings of included:

1. Almost two-thirds of the 17,000 study participants reported at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE), and more than one in five reported three or more.
2. Those participants who reported to having four adverse childhood experiences were associated with a seven-fold increase in alcoholism
3. An ACE score above six was associated with a thirty-fold increase in attempted suicide. The study concluded that as the number of ACEs increases so does the risk for sexually transmitted diseases, smoking, adolescent pregnancy, sexual violence, heart and liver disease, depression, poor work performance, financial stress, and other problems ("About" 2019).

The Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative suggests that school-wide efforts should promote educator teamwork and the focus should be on meeting the needs of all students (2016). Furthermore, the administration and all personnel should expect and prepare for students' needs to change over time. Although the reported effects of trauma may seem to cause insurmountable

negative impact on students, research findings have some equally positive findings about the resiliency of children who have experienced trauma. Resiliency does help children overcome the effects of trauma. And the good news is the resiliency can be learned and fostered by school librarians. Resiliency is not a gift bestowed upon an individual at birth. Resiliency can be cultivated through trauma-informed practices. Researchers tell us:

The good news is that although some people seem to be born with more resilience than others, those whose resilience is lower can learn how to boost their ability to cope, thrive and flourish when the going gets tough (“Resilience at Work” 2006).

According to the American Psychological Association (APA), “Resiliency is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress” (APA). The APA suggests the following initiatives to build individual resiliency:

- Coping skills can be learned to help individuals move through adversity (develop perspective, create a new narrative, see alternatives)
- Identifying and cultivating a sense of purpose (faith, culture, identity)
- Creating opportunities for social connections (“The Road to Resilience” 2011).

School librarians can easily begin to incorporate trauma-informed practices that promote resiliency and wellness through facility design, collection development, programming, and using trauma-sensitive communication.

## Facility Design

Facility design is critical to making students feel safe and comfortable and fostering well-being. School library spaces can be designed and reorganized to incorporate a variety of zones that support multiple activities and accommodate student learning, health, and wellness needs. Design should provide opportunities for students to work collaboratively, engage in positive social interaction, or experience teamwork as well as areas where students can be reflective, private, and quiet. Spaces promoting mindfulness or relaxation to facilitate health and well-being require small changes and reap big dividends in helping students de-stress. Furnished with comfortable chairs or soothing music accessible via QR codes, these spaces can facilitate creative expression such as coloring, drawing, or journaling. Likewise, makerspaces can provide for discovery, exploration, and invention. Relaxation areas can include community jigsaw puzzles or games that encourage a shared experience or teamwork among students. Life spaces that foster sewing, knitting, gardening, or inspire other hobbies encourage relaxation and engage students collectively or independently. Overall, with a little imagination and ingenuity school librarians can create a versatile, flexible space supporting many different types of activities that will benefit students’ overall well-being. Increasing library access for students throughout the school day should also be considered, adapting schedules to meet the needs of students. Some students may have trouble coping with others or managing the sensory overload that can occur in a

noisy, environment such as on the playground or in a lunch common area. Consider collaborating with community partners to provide before or afterschool care for students of all ages. These partnerships can provide academic, social, or family strengthening programs for those who may benefit.

## Collection Development

The library’s collection of print and online resources can have a significant positive impact on students’ wellness and their ability to overcome adversity. Highlighting books that address common issues experienced by children, providing programming around resources such as book clubs, interactive displays, or book talks increases awareness and access to high quality resources. The provision of “lunch and learn” workshops that highlight both resources and stress reducing activities such as guided mindfulness, yoga, or therapy dog programming helps students learn coping skills. Librarians can seek online resources as virtual additions to the library catalog to raise awareness of school library services and resources to help students build resiliency and overcome traumatic events through quality vetted virtual resources. Connect library resources with other community and government resources that address trauma and market these resources to library stakeholders or integrate them into library instruction. Providing access to quality literature through readers’ advisory, instruction, guided bibliotherapy, or enhancing access via the school library’s virtual collection can be significant in helping children cope. Researchers suggest:

Using children’s literature, teachers can help their class through difficult situations, enable individual students to transcend their own challenges and teach students to consider all viewpoints, respect differences, and become more self-aware (Gallegos 2019).

When children find themselves represented in literature and other forms of media, they begin to see themselves as worthy of notice. Books are windows to the world. Through literature children develop empathy by increasing their understanding about how people around the world are alike and different from themselves; a positive correlation exists between empathy development and lowered prejudicial attitudes and behaviors (Lowe 2006).

School librarians can bundle library and community resources, for example pairing nonfiction, fiction, biographies and memoirs with highlighted community resources. Enhance the subject headings in the library catalog to assist with findability of resources on issues.

## Trauma-Sensitive Communication

Librarians are the heart of the school library. School librarians create the safe space that students will flock to when feeling in need of a refuge. Librarians are the creators, facilitators, and designers of services that provide the caring interaction students desperately need. They have unique opportunities to engage students in interpersonal communication whether it is through one-on-one reference interactions, class instruction, readers’ advisory, or simply in day-to-day dialogue. School librarians who practice trauma-sensitive communication can increase students’ feelings of being cared for. One tenet of trauma-informed prac-



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tices is to decrease the likelihood of children being retraumatized. One aspect of this is the awareness of the power of words. Using trauma-neutral language and avoiding pejorative labels is foundational to creating a welcoming, safe environment. Rachel Wolchin advises, "Be mindful when it comes to your words. A string of some that don't mean much to you, may stick with someone else for a lifetime" (Meah 2019).

Trauma-neutral terminology can include the following:

1. Refer to individuals with substance abuse disorders rather than addicts/junkie/drunk or use "thrivor" rather than survivor or victim.
2. Ask "what has happened to you" instead of "what's wrong with you."
3. Avoid labels. Focus on behavior rather than the person. Avoid the terms perpetrator, offender, abuser, or batterer; these labels could refer to an individual's family member, parent, or caregiver and imply judgment.
4. Reflect on your own experience but AVOID saying "I know how you feel."
5. Be aware. Your language should not reflect your beliefs or assumptions about an individual or a situation.
6. Language should reflect kindness, respect, courteousness, and compassion for others.
7. Use people-first language such as: "Person experiencing homelessness" rather than "homeless person," "Person living with an addiction" rather than "suffering/battling an addiction," "Person arrested with drug conviction" rather than "drug offender."

### Summary

School librarians can create a trauma-informed library with small, significant changes in their current practices that will positively impact students' day-to-day experiences in the library. An awareness of trauma-informed practices and incorporating foundational tenets of the trauma-informed approach in the school library will foster student resiliency, wellness, and hope.



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