



### 3.11 Understanding Adversity and Trauma

#### Understanding Adversity and Trauma

Trauma can arise from single or multiple events and can be experienced in numerous ways. Trauma can result in significant physical and mental impacts which in turn may have an effect on behaviour, on recovery and on a range of socioeconomic factors that are themselves a risk for poor physical and mental health. As we know from the research and work on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), the impact of trauma can have a significant and often lifelong impact; impacts can also be intergenerational.

#### Trauma informed and Responsive

The importance of a trauma informed and responsive approach has been elevated by the impacts of Covid-19 on children, young people and adults. Covid-19 and the cost-of-living crisis have exposed significant inequality and had implications on the levels of need in relation to bereavement, financial hardship, mental health, domestic violence and complex safeguarding across the population. The further development of trauma informed practice across the system is a key part of our recovery and response. The combination of existing trauma, as well as trauma linked to Covid-19, and the cost of living crisis is likely to cause serious and lasting harm, particularly to those who are already our most disadvantaged. The impacts are being seen in early years settings and schools in children, young people, their families and staff.

This growing awareness and need to address the impact of trauma including Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) by educators has led to the emergence of a trauma informed and responsive approach in schools and across other sectors including social care and health.

#### Trauma in education settings

It is important to acknowledge the physical, neurological and behavioural impact of trauma. Trauma may be defined as repeated cycles of stressful events and the inefficient turning on or off of stress responses. When the human brain experiences a stressor, there is a decrease in blood flow to the pre-frontal cortex (PFC), the part of the brain responsible for decision making, planning, impulse control, moral

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reasoning and sense of self. Instead, the automatic fight or flight response takes over. Activating this state of heightened stress response is a survival strategy but for those who have experienced long-term or multiple trauma, it may become their way of being. This can clearly impact on behavioural functioning in academic settings.

People affected by trauma often report experiencing stigma and judgemental language from services, which compounds their feelings of blame and shame for their efforts to survive the adversity they have experienced. They often report that complex and penalising processes to access support, having to repeatedly disclose their traumatic experiences to countless professionals, being disbelieved or having the impact of their experiences minimised, long waiting lists and unsafe or unwelcoming service environments all contribute to their re-traumatisation and create substantial barriers to them accessing timely support.

One of the basic principles of supporting people to recover from trauma is through trusted relationships. In practice, trauma-responsivity requires organisations to strengthen staff's emotional skills, increase their knowledge about trauma and build confidence in supporting people affected by adversity to avoid re-traumatisation. Children and young people who experience 'toxic' shame are likely to find any form of discipline challenging, and may:

- Misinterpret well-intentioned or constructive feedback as being a personal attack against them
- Ruminates over/find it difficult to move on from discipline
- Find public discipline or praise difficult to tolerate (and demonstrate this through behaviour that challenges)
- Appear to 'hold a grudge' quickly
- Recreate the chaos they have experienced in their early life
- Need more time to calm down following an episode of distress, compared to children who do not experience toxic shame.

## **Trauma- informed educational settings**

A trauma informed educational setting is one where all adults (including support staff) recognise and respond to those children and young people who have experienced trauma in a way that meets their social, emotional and mental health needs. Research suggests that "when schools place a strong emphasis upon the emotional health and well-being of all members of the school community, and this ethos is driven by the school's senior leadership team and is evident in practice, this leads to better outcomes for all – e.g. staff retention, pupil attendance and attainment, positive home-school relationships" (Banerjee, Weare & Farr, 2014). Additionally, "secure teacher–student relationships predict greater knowledge, higher

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test scores, greater academic motivation, and fewer retentions or special education referrals than insecure teacher–student relationships” (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Research of this nature supports the use of trauma informed approaches to behaviour in schools and other educational settings, not only for children and young people who have experienced trauma but for the whole school population including staff, parents and carers.

Other benefits of taking a trauma-informed approach to education include:

- A greater understanding of the challenges faced by students
- Improved pupil learning and emotional well-being
- Greater confidence and ability to address young people’s adverse behaviours
- Reduced exclusions

## **Across Bristol, North Somerset and South Glos (BNSSG): Adversity & Trauma Informed Principles**

The following [principles](#) were developed through discussions with people with lived experience, with input from staff and clinicians and through drawing on Adversity and Trauma Informed literature (SAMHSA, 2014a, & Chart by the Institute on Trauma and Trauma-Informed Care (ITTIC), 2015) to create the current local set of Principles adopted across BNSSG.

### **Safety**

- Organisations including schools and early years settings provide a supportive, safe & nurturing environment for everyone & promotes physical, emotional & psychological safety.
- All areas of the environment are welcoming, privacy is respected & there is a focus on every interaction creating a sense of safety.

### **Choice & Clarity**

- People have choice & control. Individuals, families, friends, carers & staff are given clear & appropriate messages about their rights & responsibilities.

### **Collaboration**

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- Decisions are made with people & not for them & power is shared wherever possible.
- Individuals are invited to help design, develop, deliver & evaluate services in a meaningful way.

### Trustworthiness

- Staff seek to build trust through being consistent & reliable & through healthy & respectful interpersonal boundaries.

### Empowerment

- Individuals' strengths, skills & resilience are recognised & organisations believe in & cultivate people's empowerment & resilience .
- There is a culture of acknowledging people's efforts & worth at each & every contact.

### Inclusivity

- Organisations actively seek to recognise & address inequalities, oppression & exclusion.
- People's diverse needs are identified (e.g. gender, age, ability, sexuality, ethnicity, cultural) & responded to sensitively & with humility.
- Organisations understand the influence & impact of wider contexts in society & of historical trauma.

## [Trauma informed Knowledge and Skills Framework](#)

This Knowledge and Skills Framework aims to ensure a consistency of approach, supporting staff in recognising adversity and trauma and applying that knowledge to ensure a trauma-reducing rather than a trauma-inducing way of working. This framework has been written by partners across Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire (BNSSG) and has been co-produced with lived experience representatives.

This framework describes the knowledge and skills required by individual workers and their organisations to become adversity and trauma informed, to recognise the potential long-term impacts of these experience on themselves, on the individuals, families and communities with whom they work and to respond in compassionate and timely ways that help to support recovery and prevent further harm.

The framework also aims to support managers and supervisors to recognise the educational, emotional and practical support required for their workforce to become

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adversity and trauma informed as the workforce itself is not exempt from the impact of adversity and trauma.

Every member of the workforce has a part to play in ensuring that organisations are adversity and trauma informed. We hope that training in adversity and trauma awareness will create a shared understanding, language and value system across different teams and organisations. While the whole system needs to become adversity and trauma informed, the specific knowledge and skills required varies depending on an individual's role.

### [Implementation Toolkit](#)

This Implementation Toolkit has been designed to help implement the Trauma-Informed Knowledge & Skills Framework that has been written by partners across Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire (BNSSG). It describes the steps that individual workers and their organisations can take to implement the Knowledge & Skills Framework and embed adversity- and trauma-informed practice within their organisations.

The toolkit describes some broad steps schools and other education settings can take towards implementing trauma informed and responsive approaches such as:

- Creating a **trauma-informed working group**
- **Accessing current research** – locally we have our online Adversity and Trauma Resource Library which anyone can access here: [Adversity and Trauma Resource Library | Trello](#)
- **Training** for all staff around Trauma Awareness and Recovery
- Identify **Ambassadors**: Locally in South Glos we have a growing Adversity and Trauma Ambassador Network of multi-agency professionals all keen to develop trauma-informed approaches in their settings.
- Encourage **reflective practice** and **peer support**.

## **Useful Starter Resources and Links**

- Trauma Awareness and Recovery 1 day training available free of charge to managers or staff in any sector in South Glos who work with adults or children and would like to know more about how to facilitate the culture change needed to become trauma informed and responsive. Access through the learning and development portal on South Glos council's website.

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- Adversity and Trauma Resource Library. With a whole section dedicated to the latest research and resources around the impact on Trauma including ACEs in education settings please access this online library here: [Adversity and Trauma Resource Library | Trello](#)
- A word document list of all the resources on the library for easy access: [Trauma and adversity Resource Library List on Adversity and Trauma Resource Library | Trello](#)
- Moving from Behavioural to Relational approaches in schools: [Behavioural to Relational Responses at School \(beaconhouse.org.uk\)](#)
- The Early Action Together ACEs Learning Network provides helpful information for the public, professionals and Police about the Early Action Together

programme and its work in relation to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).  
<http://www.aces.me.uk/in-england/>

- Young Minds - Adversity and Trauma Informed Practice - A short guide for professionals working on the frontline with traumatised children.

<https://youngminds.org.uk/media/3091/adversity-and-trauma-informed-practice-guide-for-professionals.pdf>

- Young Minds - "Addressing Adversity" - Prioritising adversity and trauma-informed care for children and young people in England. YoungMinds has compiled this collection to raise awareness about the impact of adversity and trauma on the mental health of children and young people.

<https://youngminds.org.uk/media/2142/ym-addressing-adversity-book-web.pdf>

- Supporting Mental Health in Schools and Colleges - Survey and case studies with schools on activities to support pupils' mental health and wellbeing.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-mental-health-in-schools-and-colleges>

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- Safe Hands, Thinking Minds - Safe Hands and Thinking Minds Associates draw on a range of interdisciplinary expertise, theoretical perspectives, and evidence bases to promote, solidify, and develop high standards in areas of parenting, trauma, adversity (ACE's), attachment, fostering, adoption, asylum-seeking & refugee young people, and culturally/adversity/trauma-informed and trauma-responsive organisations.

<http://www.safehandsthinkingminds.co.uk>