

Reframing trauma-informed practices

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October 30, 2023

Emotionally responsive teaching supports children who've experienced various kinds of messiness in their lives.



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Across 20 years as an educator and school-based mental health counselor, I have come to understand that knowledge and strategies alone are not enough to support children who are struggling with overwhelming life circumstances and injustice. Fostering a healing connection with these children demands deep capacities for patience, generosity, perspective-taking, perseverance, and respect for the complexities of children's lives. Perhaps most challenging of all, standing with children amid their difficulties often requires us to confront our own fears, vulnerabilities, and wounds.

Those of us who seek to make a positive difference for children with challenging lives need support in broadening our understanding and conceptualization of trauma, recognizing our role in children's lives, and overcoming our own fears and insecurities. Framing this work as emotionally responsive teaching (ERT), I have sought to expand current limited conceptualizations of trauma-informed practice, reframe our understanding of trauma and its consequences, and give educators a way to better conceptualize and engage with the complexities of students' lives.



AT A GLANCE

- Discussions of trauma-informed practices tend to focus on student behaviors and strategies for managing those behaviors, rather than the circumstances students are experiencing.
- Trauma results from adversity, but not all students respond to adversity with trauma.
- It is inappropriate to assume that all students from a specific background experience trauma or that trauma is limited to certain groups of students.
- Describing children's lives as messy, instead of traumatic, enables educators to take a more expansive view of children's experiences and potential trauma responses.
- Emotionally responsive teaching promotes healing relationships among students, teachers, and families that foster resilience and restoration.

The limitations of trauma-informed perspectives

Increasingly, educators are interested in implementing trauma-informed practices (Lelli, 2021; Powell et al., 2020; Wright, 2013a). However, relatively little work has questioned what is meant by “trauma” or “trauma-informed approaches.” Consequently, many teachers who seek to be sensitive to students’ trauma chalk whatever behaviors they find challenging — such as low motivation, high levels of conflict with others, learning challenges, attention deficits, and depression — to traumatic experiences. While all of these *could* be symptoms of trauma, trauma is not the only reason that children may exhibit such behaviors.

Most trauma-informed models tend to prioritize compliance and self-regulation (Herrenkohl, Hong, & Verbrugge, 2019; Lelli, 2021; Steele & Malchiodi, 2011). But traumatic experiences affect more than just behavior — they influence self-identity, perspective of others, cognitive development and learning, relationship to power and authority, academic engagement, and social-emotional growth. Trauma is fundamentally a way of responding to overwhelming life circumstances that is individualistic, context-specific, and developmental (Wright, 2010, 2013a, 2013b).

Discussions of trauma-informed practices generally seek to inform educators about the impact of trauma on children’s mental health and behavior and to provide strategies for minimizing triggers and promoting positive behavior. But frameworks that focus primarily on the child’s behavior and strategies for regulating the classroom environment do not meaningfully consider healing from trauma as a relational process. Thus, they neglect the central role that teachers, peers, and others may play in supporting or further harming children navigating trauma and other forms of chronic stress.

In my own teaching life and in my research with other teachers, I have found that committing to students because we care about them often leads us to invest more in our instructional practices, improve the quality of our classroom environments, build stronger relationships with families, and advocate more effectively for students and families. In contrast, when I have seen schools and teachers focus on specific actions to take, neglecting the values underlying their commitment to teaching, teachers are more likely to express disappointment and frustration in children and themselves and become more frustrated and disillusioned by the teaching process. In such spaces, teachers become “strategies” and children “outcomes,” and school becomes one more source of anxiety.

Trauma versus adversity

Understanding the distinction between trauma and adversity is critical for educators interested in supporting children and families. Adversity refers to the challenging circumstances of life. Trauma is a physiological and psychological response to adversity, which has implications for emotions, behavior, learning, physical health and well-being, self-understanding, and relationships (Perrotta, 2020; Perry, 2007; Terr, 2008). Essentially, trauma is how we physically and psychologically

convert overwhelming experiences of fear and injustice into intrapersonal suffering. Far too often, we forget that trauma is the *symptom* of adversity, and that the root causes of traumatic stress are those things that lead us to feel terrified, helpless, or hopeless. When we cast trauma as purely a psychological or behavioral problem, we shift the problem from what children are being forced to endure to how the child responds to those circumstances.

During my time as a child trauma therapist, I have rarely, if ever, had a child referred to counseling because of what she or he may have experienced. Children are virtually always referred to counseling because of how they are behaving or performing academically. Framed less generously — children are usually referred for support because of how they make the people in their lives feel, rather than because of what they are being forced to experience. In supporting children and families who are struggling, we must address both the adverse circumstances of their lives and how they are responding to them.

When we disconnect our understanding of how children are behaving or performing in our classrooms from the demands of their lives, we run the risk of blaming and pathologizing the child for experiencing adversity. We also may inadvertently force them to choose between adaptations that keep them safe or connected in one part of their lives and those that might allow them to be more traditionally successful in school. For example, schools often demand that children submit to the authority of adults in the building without question. However, it is not always safe for children to assume every adult they meet is acting with good intent. Especially for children growing up amid violence, predators, or others who might hurt them, letting their guard down and submitting to authority before knowing the adult is safe could be very risky. Yet, behavior arising from a reluctance to automatically respect adults is often viewed as disrespectful or antisocial.

Because of this focus on behavior problems versus understanding children's behavior in context, the terms "trauma" and "trauma-informed" are becoming a shorthand set of terms, like "at-risk," used to categorize, disparage, and demoralize. Sometimes, they function as coded language for race, social class, or neighborhood context. This mentality shows up in statements like "How could he not be traumatized given where he's from?" or "I bet every child in that school has trauma." This way of talking about trauma is becoming a way of viewing children and where they live as deficits. This is, understandably, why many critical educators and adherents of culturally responsive pedagogy are beginning to regard trauma-informed instruction as the most recent variant of polite racism because of how it links race and social class with trauma. I share this concern.

From traumatizing to messy

As an antidote to the increasingly problematic use of the term trauma, I have begun referring to children's lives as "messy" instead. Why?

Children's lives are messy

First, because life often *is* messy! This is as true for children as it is for adults. Far too often, adults conceptualize childhood as a time of relatively little complexity or complication. We romanticize childhood as a time of play, imagination, and bliss. Even when times are not so beautiful, we often assume that children are unaware of the challenges.

For many children, this could not be further from the truth. Children frequently navigate complicated relationships, competing demands, heartbreak, disappointment, loss, confusion, and the full range of emotions that life might provoke. They experience the same challenges adults do, from personal daily difficulties (contentious divorces, bullying, difficulty making friends, worry over a parent's mental or physical state, financial stress) to the headline-making strife (community violence and police brutality; racism, heterosexism, and xenophobia; pandemics, famine, and weather emergencies).

Children enduring these situations have even less power and agency and fewer resources with which to respond than adults do. In other words, children are often trapped in adult-created situations about which they have little responsibility or control. Adults frequently underestimate the impact of their actions and decisions on the children around them. My hope is that the term “messy” will further humanize children's life circumstances and promote greater empathy.

Messiness is about situations, not responses

I also use the term “messy” to unsettle the assumptions typically employed in discussions of trauma. When supporting children and families, it is important to differentiate between traumatic reactions and the challenging, confusing, chaotic, or complicated life circumstances that children sometimes navigate. Not all challenging contexts lead children to develop traumatic stress responses. Further, sometimes young children develop traumatic responses to situations that may not seem overwhelming to adults.

For example, overhearing a story on the news about war or a tragedy in another part of the world may trigger overwhelming fear and anxiety for children, who struggle to understand concepts like proximity, weather patterns, and politics. Adults have learned to cope with such negative news and developed cognitive skills to contextualize such potential threats. Likewise, children are often forced to endure challenging circumstances because they seem to be functioning OK or because the adults around them do not know how to support them.

Messiness can be ongoing, not a single event

Third, unlike the term trauma, which typically connotes the idea of an event, “messy” suggests that the overall circumstances or social climate are what affect children's perspectives and behaviors. Increasingly, we are learning that contexts infused with chronic despair, worry, and hopelessness — like living with a parent struggling with addiction, being bullied at school, or experiencing homelessness — cause the same cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses as more acute

events like being bitten by a dog or witnessing an automobile accident (Ford & Kidd, 1998; Herman, 1992; van der Kolk, 2000). It turns out that fear and hopelessness cause similar psychological and physiological responses (Kira, 2001; van der Kolk, 2000).

Worrying about something — or doubting that difficult situations will change — seem to be as negative for our mental and physical health as actually experiencing the event itself. Increasingly, we are learning that systemic inequities — like racism, poverty, gender-based discrimination, and homo/transphobia — spur traumatic responses in children. Feeling afraid or stigmatized or fearing rejection can erode one’s sense of safety and security. The slow burn of such despair can be as corrosive as a moment of terror.

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Understanding children’s responses to messiness

While chronic and acute stressors may cause similar physiological responses for children and adults, they often manifest differently in children’s understanding, behavior, and self-concept, and require corresponding differences in treatment and support. For example, children navigating chronic stressors, like ongoing parental conflict, hiding their immigration status, or intense academic pressure, may have difficulty naming their fears because what scares them is woven into the daily fabric of their lives. Children in such circumstances may be more likely to internalize these struggles, coming to view themselves as somehow deficient.

Broadening our understanding of trauma to include chronic stressors, like systematic injustice and disparity, is fundamental in tailoring support for children navigating such challenges. My hope is that coming to understand the direct impacts of social disparity and stigma on children will empower and equip educators with the skills to transform the systems of oppression whose results show up in children’s struggles in the classroom. The “messes” most damaging to children are rarely of their own making — and require all of us to come clean.

Yet, we must always remember that experiences of trauma are not confined to a specific social location or identity. It is true that certain social stressors, like community violence, poverty, and racism, can increase the likelihood that one will experience some forms of trauma. But terrible divorces, parent mental health struggles, weather-related emergencies, and substance abuse are spread across demographic groups. It is important to embrace a “both/and” perspective in thinking about trauma, acknowledging the disparate effects of systematic stressors on some children and their families and remembering that children and families everywhere may experience adversity. In the

same way that we must avoid assuming that all children in some schools have trauma, we must not think that children in some schools have none.

Emotionally responsive teaching

Teachers play a central role in children's lives, helping them feel safe in a world that is sometimes scary, teaching them to hope, and supporting them in learning. Because life is often messy, our ways of understanding children and their behavior may sometimes require us to develop messy, or less simplistic, ways of understanding them as well. We must challenge ourselves to resist and disrupt simplistic, decontextualized, stereotypical, and oppressive perspectives of children and families.

Teaching and learning are reciprocal and relational acts that require both teachers and learners to listen and speak. Emotionally responsive teaching (ERT) is a holistic educational paradigm focused on creating reciprocal relationships and restorative learning experiences that equip children and teachers with the knowledge, skills, values, and resources necessary to develop a positive identity, pursue meaningful work, maintain enriching relationships with others, and sustain an ethical impulse (Wright, 2023). The ERT paradigm seeks to integrate ways educators think about children and ourselves, ways of being with children and ourselves, and ways of supporting children and ourselves in teaching, learning, and growing.

Relationships and reciprocal transformation

Central to teaching responsively is the awareness that the complex traumas children experience — such as chronic forms of abuse like maltreatment, neglect, community violence, poverty, racism, and exposure to addiction — are typically enacted through relationships. In other words, it is people who hurt them. Most often, it is the people children love and who are responsible for keeping them safe who hurt them most. These relational aspects of trauma undermine children's capacity to trust others, self-concept, view of the world, sense of safety, and orientation to relationships.

For example, instead of building relationships on trust and respect, children who are experiencing a traumatic response might be focused on avoiding punishment and run from connection out of a sense of perfectionism, anger, or shame and guilt. To overcome such deep-seated views of the self and others that disrupt relationships, children need emotionally corrective experiences in which they feel seen, valued, and understood. For children who feel the need to hide, have been devalued, and are not clear about their own feelings and thoughts, fostering such corrective experiences is challenging. Figuring out how to see the best in children who are trying to convince us that they are “bad kids,”

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or reaching out to connect to kids as they run from us, is not easy, but it is what is required. This is the work of healing.

The belief that everyone has something to teach and something to learn is an organizing value for ERT. Traditional models of teaching place the teacher over the child, with the teacher being the holder of knowledge and the child being the recipient. In such a framing, knowledge is taught “at” the child rather than being constructed “with” the child. In ERT, learning is viewed as a process of developing a shared understanding of both the content and each other. Implicit in this view is the belief that knowledge is created through and within relationships. Reciprocal transformation — how each person is transformed in a relationship — is central to ERT. Emotionally responsive teachers use critical reflection to examine more thoughtfully how shared interactions and experiences transform not just children and families, but us as educators. Fundamentally, ERT celebrates that teaching is not just about how we change children and families, but also about how they change us.

Fostering resilience versus minimizing risk

In practice, emotionally responsive teaching involves creating learning experiences, lessons, relationships, and explorations that allow children to view themselves as capable and competent, rather than seeking to minimize the impact of risk on children’s outcomes. Practitioners of ERT must be able to view the child simultaneously as capable and competent and as wounded and afraid — as one who is both hurt and capable of healing.

Children and their families must understand that the destination we as educators imagine for them is one of justice, strength, and well-being. It would be dangerous to follow anyone who assumes that we will not survive or who is hell-bent on guiding us to our destruction. Consequently, we must hold for our students a vision of themselves as strong, smart, and healthy, while being able to see clearly what they need to get there.

Frequently, children navigating messy life circumstances are viewed from a deficit perspective, a product of what they do not have or have not yet become. ERT, in contrast, begins with the assumption that children do not enter the world broken. Their spirits may be bruised, but they may be healed and return to a place of wholeness. We seek to honor the fact that children enter the world with the capacity for knowledge, connection, and joy. Our job as educators is to liberate and expand these capacities.

Restoring our students and ourselves

Those who have been hurt and then learned to heal may be the strongest among us and certainly the most capable of guiding others in their own healing journeys. As teachers, I believe we are strongest when we have examined our own pain, understand it, and draw on it to see how resilient and capable we are. When we use our wounds to see our strength, we are less afraid of being vulnerable and more willing to sit with others in their challenges. Seeing the best in children who have been

hurt is also an opportunity for us to catch a glimpse of our best, most generous, patient, and caring selves. These moments remind us of who we are. And as we support children in overcoming challenges, we see who they really are. In this way, supporting children with messy lives is about restoring our view of our students, their families, and ourselves as capable and competent and creating the conditions, experiences, and relationships necessary to reinforce this understanding.

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This article appears in the November 2023 issue of *Kappan*, Vol. 105, No. 3, p. 8-13.