Grief and Trauma-Informed Practices

Schools are authorized to develop practices and procedures regarding mental health, including “grief-informed and trauma-informed practices.”

“Continuing education requirements for a classroom teacher [and principals] may include instruction regarding how grief and trauma affect student learning and behavior and how evidence-based grief-informed, and trauma-informed strategies support the academic success of students affected by grief and trauma.”

Texas Education Code § 21.054
Counselor Roles and Responsibilities

You are the “go to” person when there is a crisis.

Texas Model for Comprehensive School Counseling Programs:

- Responsive Services
  - Crisis Services--critical incident has occurred and the most immediate level of intervention is necessary
  - May involve specific protocol (district policy or state law)
  - Actions taken to ensure health, well-being, and safety of students are maintained
  - Crisis response needs always take priority
“Child traumatic stress occurs when children and adolescents are exposed to traumatic events and traumatic situations, and when this exposure overwhelms their ability to cope with what they have experienced.” (NCTSN, 2008)
According to the National Institute of Mental Health, one in five youths ages 13–18 experiences a serious mental health condition, and of chronic cases of mental illness, 50 percent begin by age 14. Yet, on average, it takes 8–10 years from the onset of symptoms until intervention. How can schools play a stronger frontline role in identifying potential issues and helping affected students thrive both academically and socially?
Children’s Grief Awareness Week

1 in every 5 children will experience the death of someone close to them by the age of 18.

7 in 10 teachers have at least one student in their class(es) who have lost a parent, guardian, sibling, or close friend in the last year.

Common Types of Grief:
- Death of a loved one
- Divorce/blending families
- Abandonment
- Parental incarceration
- Foster placement
- Terminal illness
- Moving/life transitions
- Exposure to violence
- Abuse
- Bullying

Many times, adults think that children should be sheltered from discussing their grief if it brings up sad/negative emotions for them. Children’s Grief Awareness day is designed to inform caregivers about how to be effective advocates and support systems for grieving children.
ADHD or Child Traumatic Stress

TRAUMA
- Feelings of fear, helplessness, uncertainty, vulnerability
- Increased arousal, edginess and agitation
- Avoidance of reminders of trauma
- Irritability, quick to anger
- Feelings of guilt or shame
- Dissociation, feelings of unreality or being "outside of one's body"
- Continually feeling on alert for threat or danger
- Unusually reckless, aggressive or self-destructive behavior

ADHD
- Difficulty sustaining attention
  - Struggling to follow instructions
- Difficulty with organization
  - Fidgeting or squirming
  - Difficulty waiting or taking turns
  - Talking excessively
- Hyperactive
- Restless
- Difficulty sleeping

OVERLAP
- Difficulty concentrating and learning in school
  - Easily distracted
  - Often doesn't seem to listen
  - Disorganization
- Hyperactive
- Restless
- Difficulty sleeping

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network August 2016
Video

Paper Tigers

http://kpjrfilms.co/paper-tigers/
What is Trauma-Informed Care?

- Strengths-based service delivery approach
- Understands and responds to the impact of trauma
- Emphasizes physical, psychological, and emotional safety for students, teachers, counselors, administrators, and families
- Creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment
- Anticipates and avoids retraumatization
- Promotes survivor participation in the development, delivery, and evaluation of services

(SAMHSA, 2014; www.samhsa.gov)
“A trauma-informed perspective views trauma-related symptoms and behaviors as an individual’s best and most resilient attempt to manage, cope with, and rise above his or her experience of trauma.”
(SAMHSA, 2014)
What is Trauma?

- Event, series of events, or set of circumstances
- Experienced (real or perceived) as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening
- With lasting adverse effects
Types of Traumatic Events

- Can be experienced directly, witnessed, feel threatened, or hear about an event that affects someone they know.
- Individual, group, community, mass trauma
- Human-made
  - Accidents, Catastrophes
  - Intentional Acts
- Natural Disasters
- Life events
  - Death
  - Illness
  - Job loss
Two-thirds of Americans are exposed to extreme stress in childhood, things like divorce, a death in the family or a caregiver's substance abuse. And this early adversity, if experienced in high enough doses, "literally gets under our skin, changing people in ways that can endure in their bodies for decades," Burke Harris writes in her new book, *The Deepest Well: Healing the Long-Term Effects of Childhood Adversity:*

"It can tip a child's developmental trajectory and affect physiology. It can trigger chronic inflammation and hormonal changes that can last a lifetime. It can alter the way DNA is read and how cells replicate, and it can dramatically increase the risk for heart disease, stroke, cancer, diabetes — even Alzheimer's."
Before they complete high school, nine in 10 children will experience the death of a family member or close friend. One in 20 will lose a parent. This means that in almost every class, every year, in every school, there’s likely to be at least one grieving student, if not more.

Examples of Traumatic Experiences

- Trauma of Natural Disaster: Hurricane Harvey Victims
- Trauma of Life Events & Systems: Foster Children, Neglect
- Trauma of Grief: Death of a close friend or family member
- Human-Made Trauma: Physical or Sexual abuse, Bullying, School Violence
- Trauma of Life Events & Systems: Economic insecurity, Discrimination
The Impacts of Trauma & Grief
Adverse Childhood Experience Pyramid and Questionnaire
The Brain’s Response to Trauma

In response to trauma, hormones are released into body, which impact:

- Ability to react physically
- Ability to think rationally
- Ability to consolidate or group memories

This is a neurobiological response, not a choice.
How the Brain and Body Respond to Trauma

- Hypothalamus
- Pituitary
- Hippocampus
- Amygdala
Overwhelms resources to cope and often ignites “fight, flight or freeze” reactions. “Am I safe?”
The Brain’s Response to Trauma

Gil (2006) notes that traumatic events are experienced and stored implicitly in the right hemisphere of the brain (where there is no language, reason, logic) and that “this suggests that allowing children a period of time to access and stimulate the right hemisphere of the brain could eventually activate the necessary (explicit) functions of the left hemisphere, which appears to shut down during traumatic experiences” (p. 102).

When people are in extreme fear, the right brain shuts down the capacity of our thinking brain. Perry (2004) reported that traumatized students often hear only about half the words spoken by their teachers.
Impact of Trauma on Functioning
Impact of Trauma on Functioning

- Can impair learning and school performance (memory, cognition, processes, problem solving, attention, focus)
- Can interfere with ability to progress through typical developmental processes, bereavement processes
- Intrusive memories (nightmares, guilt, self-blame)
- Avoidance and withdrawal
- Increased arousal (irritability, anger, sleep issues, increased vigilance, fears about safety)
- Physical distress (stomachaches, headaches)
- Regression (bed-wetting, thumb-sucking, clinging to parents)

(NCTSN, 2008)
"The costs of the many kinds of scarcity in their lives -- money, health, respect, safety, affirmation, choices, belonging -- is seriously reduced “mental bandwidth,” the cognitive and emotional resources needed to deal with making good decisions, learning, healthy relationships, and more.”

(Verschelden, 2017)
Grief Reactions

It is important to remember that there is no right or wrong way for children and adolescents to react to a loss, and that no two children are expected to react in exactly the same way. Grief reactions among children and adolescents can be highly variable and are influenced by several factors, including students’ developmental level and/or the presence of mental health challenges or disabilities.
Grief's Effects

For children, grief can have a considerable impact on learning and school performance. It’s quite common for children to experience at least temporary difficulty with concentration and to easily be distracted. They may be confused or overwhelmed by their school assignments or lose interest in them.

Sleep problems are common. Outbursts of anger or despair or expressions of guilt and shame frequently occur.
Preschool Level

Young children are generally unable to directly express their emotions.

Adults should be alert to the following symptoms:

- Decreased verbalization
- Increased anxiety (e.g., clinginess, fear of separation)
- Regressive behaviors (e.g., bedwetting, thumb sucking)

Although more able to express feelings with words, school-age children more readily communicate grief responses through changes in behavior including the following:

- Difficulty concentrating or inattention
- Somatic complaints (e.g., headaches, stomach problems)
- Sleep disturbances (e.g., nightmares, fear of the dark)
- Repeated telling and acting out of the event
- Withdrawal
- Increased irritability, disruptive behavior, or aggressive behavior
- Increased anxiety (e.g., clinging, whining)
- Depression, guilt, or anger
- A decrease in academic performance or school attendance
Teenagers exhibit grief symptoms more like those of adults, with less experience and less developed coping skills. Their symptoms might include:

- Flashbacks
- Emotional numbing or depression
- Nightmares
- Avoidance or withdrawal
- Peer relationship problems
- Substance abuse or other high-risk behaviors
- A decrease in academic performance or school attendance
Middle School

Some students show signs of stress in the first few weeks after a trauma, but return to their usual state of physical and emotional health. Even a child who does not exhibit serious symptoms may experience some degree of emotional distress, and for some children this distress may continue or even deepen over a long period of time.

Some traumatic experiences occur once in a lifetime, others are ongoing. Many children have experienced multiple traumas, and for too many children trauma is a chronic part of their lives. Students who have experienced traumatic events may experience problems that impair their day-to-day functioning.
Middle School

Situations that can be traumatic:

- Physical or sexual abuse
- Abandonment, betrayal of trust (such as abuse by a caregiver), or neglect
- The death or loss of a loved one
- Life-threatening illness in a caregiver
- Witnessing domestic violence
- Automobile accidents or other serious accidents
- Bullying
- Life-threatening health situations and/or painful medical procedures
- Witnessing or experiencing community violence (e.g., drive-by shooting, fight at school, robbery)
- Witnessing police activity or having a close relative incarcerated
- Life-threatening natural disasters
- Acts or threats of terrorism
Be alert to the behavior of students who have experienced one or more of these events. Be aware of both the children who act out AND the quiet children who don’t appear to have behavioral problems. These students often “fly beneath the radar” and do not get help. They may have symptoms of avoidance and depression that are just as serious as those of the acting out student. Try your best to take the child’s traumatic experiences into consideration when dealing with acting out behaviors.

Students who have experienced traumatic events may have behavioral or academic problems or their suffering may not be apparent at all.
Traumatic events happen in all communities and schools. School counselors are often expected to have immediate answers.

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Large School</th>
<th>Small School</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Use Available Resources</strong></td>
<td>Counseling Program/ Mental Health Deputies (Crisis Team)</td>
<td>Region Center/ Mental Health Deputies (Crisis Team)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Keep It Personal for Your School</strong></td>
<td>Theater/CC/Gym</td>
<td>Gym/Library</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Guess Who Is Your BFF??</strong></td>
<td>Small School/Local Churches</td>
<td>Big School</td>
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No matter if you are in a school of 3000 or the only counselor in the district, kids are kids.
Impact on Parents, Family, Friends & You!

- Secondary and indirect trauma
- Often suffer many of the same initial and long-term symptoms.
- Overprotection or blame
- High stress associated with unsupportive behaviors (e.g. emotional withdrawal, blaming)
- Vicarious trauma “cost of caring”
Re-traumatization

- Cues in environment (sounds, smells, lights)
- Anniversaries of events
- Even related happy thoughts and memories
- When retelling what occurred and accessing memories
- It’s not about forgetting the incident.
What Can Schools Do?
Steps When Students Act Out “Tip of an Iceberg”

1) Acknowledge the behavior may be a traumatic response
2) Acknowledge and respect boundaries
3) Assume that there is a link between a stimulus in the environment and the behavior. Look for the stimulus.
4) Play a role in removing the stimulus, helping the student remove, or helping the student respond differently.
5) Use compassionate strategies. Foster resiliency for all present. Reduce any residual concerns (embarrassment, shame, humiliation, harassment, violence). Infuse positive attributes (unconditional acceptance, respect, reason, connectedness)
6) Monitor student progress. Provide alternatives as needed.

(Wolpow, Johnson, Hertel & Kincaid, 2009)
Grief - What can schools do?

**Acknowledge the loss.** A common choice adults often make is simply to avoid talking about the death. They feel awkward, they don’t want to cause more pain for a student, and they don’t know what to say.

You can make a world of difference with a simple, straightforward comment, such as, “I was so sorry to hear about your sister’s death. I’m thinking about you and your family.” It can be as easy as that.
Grief - What can schools do?

Offer support and information to children and their families. It’s important to be prepared to talk with families immediately after a death. Often, families speak to school staff before they’ve been in touch with other professionals such as pediatricians or mental health professionals.

You should be aware of community resources to support grieving children and adults and share this information with families.
Grief - What can schools do?

Take steps to ensure school is a safe place, not a source of additional distress. It’s normal for grieving students to struggle with classwork or find it challenging to manage extracurricular activities. But those students may be facing academic setbacks or school failure for the first time in their lives. This can create anxiety and frustration.

This might include such things as postponing a test, allowing a student to complete a paper instead of taking a final or providing alternative activities that better match the student’s current ability to concentrate and complete work.
Grief - General Tips to Support Students of All Ages

- Be understanding and tolerant of common grief reactions which include: decreased appetite, difficulty sleeping, a decreased ability to concentrate, increased sadness, and social withdrawal. Students sometimes also feel anger toward the deceased for leaving them.

- Be simple and straightforward. Discuss death in developmentally appropriate terms for students.
  - Use words such as “death,” “die,” or “dying” in your conversations and avoid euphemisms such as “they went away,” “they are sleeping,” “departed,” and “passed away.” Such euphemisms are abstract and may be confusing, especially for younger children.
  - Let students know that death is not contagious. Although all human beings will die at some point, death is not something that can be “caught” and it is unusual for children to die.
Grief - General Tips to Support Students of All Ages

- Be brief and patient. Remember that you may have to answer the same question multiple times and repeat key information to ensure understanding.
- Listen, acknowledge feelings, and be nonjudgmental.
- Express your own feelings in an open, calm, and appropriate way that encourages students to share their feelings and grief.
- Avoid making assumptions and imposing your own beliefs on students.
- A variety of feelings are normal. Be sensitive to each student’s experience, as there is no one right way to respond to a loss. Feelings and behaviors will vary across students and will change throughout the bereavement process.
Grief - General Tips to Support Students of All Ages

- Normalize expressed feelings by telling students such are common after a death. However, if their expressions include risk to self (e.g. suicidal thoughts) or others, refer immediately to the appropriate professionals.
- Be sensitive to cultural differences of students and their families in expressing grief and honoring the dead.
- Consider a student's intellectual abilities, behavior, and conceptual understanding of death. For children with developmental disabilities. Their limited communication skills do not mean they are unaffected by the death. Behaviors such as increased frustration and compulsivity, somatic complaints, relationship difficulties, and increased self-stimulatory behaviors may be expressions of grief.
Grief - General Tips to Support Students of All Ages

- Maintain a normal routine in your classroom and engage students in activities they previously enjoyed.
- Provide the opportunity to talk and ask questions and use these questions to guide further discussion. Encourage students to share feelings, but in ways that are not disruptive to the class or hurtful to other students.
- Keep in mind that some children may have a difficult time expressing their feelings or may not feel comfortable talking at school. Do not pressure these students to talk. Some may prefer writing, drawing, listening to music, or playing a game instead of talking about their feelings. Provide students with a variety of options for expressing grief.
- Talk to the bereaved student’s classmates about grief and emphasize the importance of being understanding and sensitive.
- Help bereaved students find a peer support group. There will likely be other who have also experienced the death of a loved one.

Recommendations for Trauma-Informed Processes -- Teaching & Learning

- Safe and welcoming classroom environment
- Maintaining high expectations, reasonable limits, and consistent routines.
- Brain Breaks, Movement, & Focused-Attention Practices (Desautels, 2017)
- Curriculum related to social - emotional skills
- Warning students about sudden environmental changes, schedule changes, or prepare them for difficult topics/content, halt activities creating a concern
- Build proactive coping strategies for yourself (know triggers, map your day, be prepared)
Recommendations for Trauma-Informed Processes - Counseling Practices

- Obtain a good history, screenings & assessments.
- Giving student some choices, empowering as part of process, reestablishing control
- Identifying experiences with trauma as a factor and recovery as a goal. Clarifying misconceptions.
- Provide clear messages of availability and accessibility. Expect parents and students to be unfamiliar with resources & processes. Collaborative referrals
- Group counseling support
- Culturally competent
Recommendations for Trauma-Informed Processes -- School Systems

- Create supportive physical spaces (consider all of the senses) - online spaces too
- Sense of Belonging and Community
- Readiness to Learn (sleep, meals, schedules, after school programs)
- Self-Care for Staff (wellness groups, goals)
- Professional development plans
- Investigation processes (Title IX, Bullying)
- Behavior and discipline
- Accommodations and modifications, safety planning
Resources for School Personnel

One out of every 4 children attending school has been exposed to a traumatic event that can affect learning and/or behavior. Help is available. Hope is possible!

Child Trauma
A Toolkit for Educators
Available in English and Spanish

Psychological First Aid
For Schools - A Complete Manual

School Resources for School Personnel
By Teachers For Teachers

Other Network Resources for Educators on Child Trauma
Information Knowledge & Tools

Bullying & Cyber Bullying
Awareness/Prevention
Be Prepared Be Informed

Schools and Trauma
Speaker Series
Watch, Listen & Learn!
Nine Resources to Become a Trauma-Informed School

Starr.org’s National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children (TLC)

All around the world, TLC offers training courses, materials and conferences. Their mission is to provide all the tools that children, adults, families and communities need when getting through the devastating effects of trauma. The site also provides trauma informed training that includes certification just for educators.
Nine Resources to Become a Trauma-Informed School

Helping Traumatized Children Learn

These two incredible books—Helping Traumatized Children Learn and Creating and Advocating for Trauma-Informed Schools—discuss the impact trauma has on learning, behavior and school-wide relationships. Add them to your school library or, you can instantly download and handout to your staff.
Nine Resources to Become a Trauma-Informed School

Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators

This toolkit from The National Child Traumatic Stress Network has valuable information on the psychological and behavioral impacts that trauma has on students of all ages. It includes resources for parents and caregivers too.
Nine Resources to Become a Trauma-Informed School

The Heart of Learning: Compassion, Resiliency, and Academic Success

This handbook is one your staff will use on a daily basis as it’s filled with strategies to create compassionate classrooms and school-community partnerships.

Child Trauma Academy

This amazing web site/resource strives to improve the lives of high risk children. Bookmark it for ideas, new research and help when you’re feeling stuck.
Nine Resources to Become a Trauma-Informed School

**The National Resilience Institute**

The site includes a selection of infographics, videos, blog posts and more that breaks down what’s needed to become a trauma sensitive school. And, it’s filled with thoughtful advice on listen to children and understand their pain.

**Trauma-Sensitive Schools**

Susan Craig’s book *Trauma-Sensitive Schools: Learning Communities Transforming Children’s Lives* is a great choice for an a school-wide staff read. It has strong ideas for educators ready to create a school culture based on safety and resiliency. Plus, pass along the tips on helping children self-regulate their emotions to every teacher in your school.
Nine Resources to Become a Trauma-Informed School

**Childhood Trauma: What Every Teacher Needs to Know**

This important video highlights the five most important things that all educators know about helping their students through trauma and knowing when they have a student in need.

**Childhood Trauma: Expert Answers to Tough Questions From Real Teachers**

Trauma expert Dr. Caelan Soma, clinical director of the National Institute for Trauma and Loss in Children, shares her best advice. She answers questions on dealing with a myriad of traumas students face including divorce, death, suicide, foster care and more.
K-12 Crisis Management

Downloadable guides for certain situations:

http://www.cmionline.com/get-started/k-12/

Region 15 Crisis:

http://www.esc15.net/Page/342

Texas State School Safety Center

https://txssc.txstate.edu/topics/
For More Information on Grief

The Coalition to Support Grieving Students [www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org)

- Teacher Training Modules: Found in the Additional Resources section of [www.grievingstudents.org](http://www.grievingstudents.org), these free downloadable PowerPoint presentations for school counselors to use in presentations to other school professionals.
For More Information on Grief

The National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement [www.schoolcrisiscenter.org](http://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org)

Provides support and guidance to individual schools by e-mail at info@grievingstudents.org or by phone at (877) 53-NCSCB.

West Virginia Department of Education: Group Lesson Plans
[http://wvde.state.wv.us/counselors/group-lessons.html](http://wvde.state.wv.us/counselors/group-lessons.html)
School-wide Grief

School Crisis, Grief Counseling
School Violence Prevention

School Violence Prevention: Guidelines for Administrators and Crisis Teams

Recommended Book Resources

1. **Love, Hugs, and Hope**
   - Written by Christy Monson
   - Illustrated by Lori Nawro

2. **Brave Bart**
   - A Story for Traumatized and Grieving Children
   - By Caroline H. Sheppard, ACSW
Recommended Book Resources

1. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* by Bessel Van Der Kolk, M.D.
References

Access to Slides

https://goo.gl/4erXhM