

Trauma-Informed leadership: A Framework for Everyday Practice

Many teachers are familiar with the tenets of trauma-informed practice, but what do these look like from a whole-school leadership perspective? Dr Pooky Knightsmith outlines five principles

I have taken the principles of trauma-informed practice and applied them through the lens of the why and how for school leaders every day. There are lots of ideas in here, so cherry-pick what will work for you and your setting and maybe explore them within the context of your network or trust too.

Principle 1: Safety

Within a whole school approach, getting the trauma-informed principle of safety right will mean that efforts are made to ensure the physical and psychological safety of staff and students. This includes enabling a feeling of freedom from threat or harm.

The principle of safety matters because everyone has a fundamental right to feel safe and, on a more practical level, if people do not feel safe, they cannot learn well or teach well. It is also worth remembering that for some of our community, we may be the only safe place and people they know.

Safe leadership looks like:

- Authentic warmth: Smile! Use open body language, aim to be approachable and care out loud, voicing the kind thoughts you have about children and adults in your care.
- Clear communication: Communicate clearly, consistently and warmly. Try to avoid triggering language and take care about your tone of voice, trying to avoid harsh, angry, loud tones outside of emergency moments.
- Check-in: Regularly check-in on staff and students to ensure they feel happy and safe. Use non-fear-based methods of motivation.
- No surprises: Give notice of and explanations for requests and changes.

Safety: Ideas for putting it into practice

- Today: Smile! Many micro-interactions make a big difference. Adopt a calm tone of voice.
- Tomorrow: Approach issues with curiosity, not animosity. Replace stare and scare with walk and talk meetings.
- Next term: Audit the physical environment to ensure it promotes warmth. How can you make people feel safe? Review your communications.

Principle 2: Choice

Within a whole school approach, getting the trauma-informed principle of choice right will mean that staff and students have a choice in decision-making processes. Individuals are supported and scaffolded to make positive decisions and choices and set their own goals. The principle of choice matters because a lack of control or choice can trigger a fear response in trauma-experienced children and adults. Conversely, access to control and choice universally promotes independence and resilience and results in individuals who are more motivated and more likely to strive and thrive.

Leaders who promote choice:

- Step back: Try not to make all of the decisions, instead aim to create an environment where it is safe for individuals to make choices for themselves.
- Are open-minded: Acknowledge that different people might make different choices (and at different times) and that that is okay. Try not to judge the choices of others.
- Scaffold: For those who find making positive choices hard, offer more support and limit choices a little more, being clear about consequences and what will happen next.

Choice: Ideas for putting it into practice

- Today: Bounce-back – ask questions instead of automatically giving answers. Offer mini-choices to get things started, e.g. “shall we sit here or there?”.
- Tomorrow: Identify three areas where you can relinquish control. Set goals using student, not adult motivations.
- Next term: Commit to making every student's voice heard. Revisit your behaviour policy in the context of choices.

Principle 3: Collaborate

Within a whole school approach, getting the trauma-informed principle of collaboration right will mean that decisions about people are not made without them. Power is shared and different points of view are encouraged and respected.

It matters because stronger systems are built when we work together and being involved promotes the skills and confidence of both children and adults. Additionally, when it comes to our more vulnerable learners, genuine team-around-the-child collaboration can promote more positive outcomes.

Leaders who promote collaboration:

- Are not always the expert: It is important to recognise that the expert in the student is the student; the expert in the teaching assistant is the teaching assistant, etc.
- Reach-out: Pro-actively ask for input from parents/carers or groups who are less well represented to ensure that collaboration is inclusive and not limited to the same people who are always keen to get involved.

- Break-down barriers: Notice, acknowledge and address physical, psychological and other barriers to collaboration.

Collaboration: Ideas for putting it into practice

- Today: Ask for the voice of least experience first in meetings. Commit to doing “with” not “to” in all you do.
- Tomorrow: Identify barriers to home-school collaboration. Gift your mistakes, have a fail of the day – this shows others it is safe to try.
- Next term: Rotate team roles – allow different people to lead. Develop togetherness through laughter, rituals and routines.

Principle 4: Trust

Within a whole school approach, getting the trauma-informed principle of trust right will mean that transparency exists in the school’s policies and procedures, with the objective of building trust among staff, students and the wider community.

Trust matters because without it, secure attachments cannot be formed. Consequently, trust sits at the heart of all relationships. Additionally, within a school environment, trust means that everyone knows what to expect of one another and, within a network of trust, we are able to aim higher and achieve more.

Leaders who promote trust are:

- Consistent: They keep showing up physically and psychologically for the children and adults in their care.
- Persistent: They don’t give up – they hold on to hope even when others let go.
- Predictable: They say what they will do, and they do what they say.
- Trusting: They place trust in others.

Trust: Ideas for putting it into practice

- Today: Don’t assume trust, earn it by showing that you are trustworthy. Use open questions to build bridges with the adults and children in your care.
- Tomorrow: Be honest: communicate transparently. Place your trust in others – do this out loud.
- Next term: Confidentiality – create a “who, what, when, how, why” plan to enable children to understand what happens with sensitive information about them. Deliver training on how experience of trauma can erode the capacity for trust in others and explore how we can develop these relationships.

Principle 5: Empower

Within a whole school approach, getting the trauma-informed principle of empowerment right will mean that the school has a culture that enables staff and students to feel validated and affirmed and to recognise and build on their strengths and skills.

Empowerment matters because it gives everyone the confidence to self-advocate in an environment where every voice and idea can be heard and respected. Promoting empowerment also creates an environment of learning together which supports feelings of belonging and connection.

Empowering school leaders:

- Develop a coaching culture: They create a supportive environment in which they coach others and invite coaching from others in return.
- Invest: Time (and budget) is invested in developing the skills and understanding of the whole team.
- Leave no-one behind: Every voice is heard, and every participant is supported to be a confident and creative contributor.
- Promote good ideas: Empowering leaders listen to the ideas and opinions of others and incorporate and appropriately credit these.

Empower: Ideas for putting it into practice

- Today: Listen to understand – make others feel seen and heard. Notice – give spontaneous, sincere, specific praise often.
- Tomorrow: Think again – invite challenges to your point of view. Role-model vulnerability and learn out loud.
- Next term: Audit and use cross-team strengths/skills/passions. Build bitesize CPD moments into regular agendas.

--

This article was originally written for [SecEd Magazine](#). You can [read my past SecEd articles here](#).