

TRAUMA-INFORMED BEST PRACTICES for EDUCATORS

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events in a young person's life. While only ten ACEs are regularly studied, any traumatic event can cause a child or adolescent to experience toxic stress. Toxic stress can lead to social, emotional, and cognitive impairment during development. Victims of trauma may use using risky health behaviors to cope with these impairments.¹ When talking about sex education, it's important to acknowledge that a student's behavior might be the result of trauma. It is also important to not re-traumatize a student by doing something that could trigger their past experiences. When we use a trauma-informed approach in sex education, we acknowledge the trauma a person may have experienced, avoid re-traumatization, reserve judgement, and empower students to be more resilient.

A TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACH TO SEX EDUCATION

A **Trauma-Informed Approach** incorporates the principles of safety, trustworthiness and transparency, peer support, collaboration and mutuality, empowerment, voice, and choice, and cultural, historical, and gender issues.² The tips below can help you incorporate these principles into sex education.

Safety

Create a safe environment that will make students comfortable to discuss their opinions and learn in. Creating group agreements that contain rules about being respectful of others can help make the environment feel more open. Use trigger warnings about sensitive topics and give students an option to leave during topics that may make them uncomfortable. Using language that is inclusive of LGBTQ+ students, students who have experienced an adolescent pregnancy, and students who have had an STI can help set the tone to be open-minded and non-judgmental. Make sure to not shame the experiences of students in these groups but to offer factual, unbiased information.

Trustworthiness and Transparency

For students who have experienced trauma, finding out that you shared personal information with someone that they didn't want to know can add to any hesitancy they have about reaching out for help. Be clear about what kinds of disclosures you are required to report so youth can make informed decisions about what to share. Being honest when you don't know the answer to a question can also help build trust.

Peer Support

Normalizing experiences is important to make students feel safe and accepted. If a student does disclose trauma, reinforce that they are not alone. A more general way to incorporate peer support is by allowing students to answer each others' questions when they arise. This gives them a chance to share their thoughts and get the perspective of someone their own age.

Collaboration and Mutuality

Give students a list of topics that the class will cover and allow them to submit questions anonymously ahead of time. This gives you time to answer all of their questions and allows them to guide the discussion in a way that will be the most helpful for them.

Empowerment, Voice, and Choice

Explicitly talk about consent, what it looks like, and how to obtain consent from a partner to emphasize students' autonomy over their own sexuality. This is important for reaffirming victims of sexual abuse who were not given a choice. It also teaches other students to be respectful of others' choices. More generally in the classroom, let students make their own decisions about working alone or in a pair and whether they want to have individual reflections or small group reflections before talking with the rest of the class. This gives students who are uncomfortable with certain topics the option to learn in a way that makes them more comfortable.

Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues

Consider the daily realities and experiences of your students and how their experiences impact their choices. Some lessons may feel more or less relevant to your students based on what they are experiencing. Make sure that any referrals you give are to organizations that are relevant to your students. Recommend organizations that have worked with diverse youth and will be helpful to women, LGBTQ+ youth, and youth of different racial and cultural backgrounds.³