Building Safer Spaces: A Trauma-Informed Guide to Difficult Conversations in Schools

Schools should be safe, supportive environments where all students can learn and feel connected. When schools create caring environments, children are more engaged, build stronger relationships, and show more positive, helpful behaviors. In a world where there are lots of different opinions and overwhelming information, schools play a crucial role in fostering a shared understanding of the complexities that influence child well-being.

As educators, you want to feel effective in your roles. Yet the urgency of meeting student needs—especially for those impacted by trauma—can feel overwhelming. Recognizing your own experiences, as well as the challenges facing schools, students, and communities, is an important part of supporting students' well-being and healing.

Acknowledging these challenges is the first step toward providing effective support. As school staff, you play a key role in engaging in difficult conversations with care and compassion so you can understand and respond to students' needs. Efforts to support students are strengthened when adults build connections, seek understanding, stay curious, and recognize differences. Together, these practices help create a shared commitment to responding to trauma in ways that promote healing. These practices also reflect the foundation of trauma-informed schools, which are built on principles that guide how to understand, respond to, and support students affected by trauma.

This perspective transforms how common school challenges are viewed—chronic absenteeism may be understood as a trauma response rather than defiance; aggressive behavior may be seen as a survival mechanism rather than willful misconduct; and academic struggles may reflect the impact of chronic stress on brain development rather than lack of ability or effort.

Trauma-informed schools operate on key principles such as:

1. Understanding that trauma is widespread and affects learning and behavior
2. Recognizing the signs and symptoms of trauma in students, families, and staff
3. Integrating trauma knowledge into all policies and practices
4. Actively working to avoid re-traumatization

Having open and honest conversations is an essential part of supporting students as these discussions help staff to address challenges directly, build trust, and respond to students' needs with understanding rather than judgment.

Why These Conversations are Hard – and Essential

Schools have always been places where broader social issues and differing perspectives come together. Throughout history, topics such as racial integration, religious differences, sex education, and school safety have prompted strong opinions and difficult conversations. Even when school communities do not agree on how to approach these issues, supporting students and creating environments where they feel safe, supported, and ready to learn remains a shared priority.

Just as educators in the past learned to navigate these concerns, today's staff need the skills to engage in trauma-informed conversations about issues affecting their students. When students feel safe and understood, they are better able to focus and learn. Addressing sensitive topics is central to trauma-informed practice, yet staff, students, and families often encounter barriers that make these discussions complex, such as:

1. **Policies and procedures vary widely** across districts, making expectations hard to navigate.

2. **Staff may experience moral distress** when school policies conflict with their personal values or sense of what is best for students.

3. **Differences of opinion among staff or between families and schools can create tensions** and make it harder to provide consistent support.

4. **Conversations about policies, curricula, or student needs may become tense or shut down**, limiting opportunities to address concerns in supportive ways.

5. **When students, families, or staff feel excluded, silenced, or unsafe**, disagreements can intensify and make constructive conversations more difficult.

6. **Unclear or conflicting polices and polarized environments** can distract from shared commitment to student well-being and meeting their basic needs.

> *"Trauma-informed practices require adults to face hard truths together. When staff engage in challenging discussions, they help create the stable, predictable environments that children need to feel safe and ready to learn."*

Responding to the Needs of Student Populations that Experience Higher Rates of Trauma

Students come to school with very different life experiences, and many have faced significant adversities. While any student can struggle emotionally, research shows that some groups face higher risks for mental health challenges, disciplinary actions or academic barriers. When schools look closely at the data—such as discipline referrals, mental health crises, bullying incidents, and academic struggles—clear patterns emerge. These patterns highlight the importance of trauma-informed approaches that help staff understand what students are experiencing and responding in ways that support healing and learning.

When looking at different student outcomes, there is a tendency to focus on individual deficits or make assumptions about students' abilities or character. A trauma-informed approach requires you to look beyond behaviors and academic performance and consider the experiences that may be shaping how a student shows up at school.

This shift moves you from asking "What is wrong with this student?" to "What has this student experienced, and how can we support their healing and growth?" It recognizes that challenging behaviors are often adaptive responses to difficult circumstances rather than character flaws or intentional defiance. All children benefit from being seen, supported, and accepted for who they are, and they need this foundation to learn and grow.

A healing-centered approach builds on trauma-informed practices by also asking, "What strengths does this student possess? What are their hopes and aspirations? How can we nurture their resilience?" This perspective recognizes that every student—regardless of their past experiences—has assets, wisdom, and potential that can be supported and developed.

Promoting Student Well-being and Life Skills as a Support for Trauma

Students impacted by trauma often struggle to recognize and regulate emotions, which can affect their learning and the learning environment of others. Student Well-being and Life Skills is a universal, whole-child approach that helps students build the practical skills they need to manage stress, understand their emotions, and form healthy relationships. These skills benefit all learners, and they are especially important for students with trauma histories or who have experienced adversities. When educators integrate Student Well-Being and Life Skills into everyday practices, they create a foundation of emotional safety, connection, and resilience. This supportive environment allows students to engage more fully in learning and participate positively in the school community.

While healing centered practices help nurture each student's strengths, schools also need to understand the larger patterns of adversity that affect student well-being. Universal life skills instruction supports all learners, but some groups experience higher rates of trauma that influence how they show up in school. To better understand these experiences, the following sections describe how certain student populations may face additional adversities and the impacts when these challenges go unaddressed. This is not an exhaustive list but highlights patterns that can guide trauma-informed support.

Understanding How Historical Trauma Impacts Students

Trauma is not limited to discrete events; both individual and collective experiences can have lasting effects that shape how children learn and interact today. A trauma-informed approach includes providing students with opportunities to explore history in ways that reflect both challenges and achievements–looking at the past and present in all its complexity. Without this opportunity, students are ill-equipped to understand the intricacies of human interactions and navigate their own roles in a diverse society. When key aspects of history are left out,

students may lack the context needed to understand how past events influence present-day experiences. Recognizing and addressing historical trauma allows students to develop critical thinking, empathy, and resilience. It supports students in making sense of their own experiences and strengthens their ability to navigate the complexities of society.

Historical trauma is one of many important contexts that shape how students understand themselves and their communities. In addition to these collective experiences, many students also face identity based adversities that compound the effects of trauma and influence their sense of belonging at school.

Supporting Students with Identity-Based Adversities Also Experiencing Trauma

For students with identity-based differences, interactions including exclusion, misunderstanding, or rejection create additional layers of adversity to the traumas they experience. When students' identities are dismissed or invalidated, students may experience stress, isolation, and a diminished sense of belonging. Understanding and validating their experiences is essential. Trauma-informed schools prioritize creating environments where all students feel safe, valued, and connected. When students are not taught about the core needs for safety, belonging, understanding, contribution, and competence, they will not learn what it means to be part of a community, and they may blame themselves when they don't have the skills to navigate challenging issues. This can significantly impact their self-esteem and sense of self. Validating and supporting youth's identities helps reduce the negative impact of trauma on their ability to succeed academically and emotionally.

Just as identity based adversity can intensify trauma's impact, displacement from one's physical environment creates another layer of stress that affects how students adjust, connect, and learn. Students who are unhoused, immigrating, or seeking refuge often carry both past trauma and the ongoing challenges of starting over in a new environment.

Supporting Students Navigating Displacement and Ongoing Adversities

The process of leaving one's home and adjusting to another is regularly associated with grief, loss, and disruption. This is true for unhoused students, immigrants, and refugees. Many unhoused students have complex trauma histories before their displacement or experienced a recent disaster. Similarly, many immigrant and refugee children have multiple traumatic experiences associated with the reasons for migration or the journey itself. A trauma-informed school approach recognizes these experiences and focuses on helping students feel safe, connected, and supported in a new community to foster the ability to learn. When children are excluded or bullied because of socio-economic, cultural, or ethnic differences, it compounds trauma, including a loss of sense of self, safety, and trust. This creates unsafe learning environments and impedes their ability to focus and acquire knowledge. By fostering belonging and trust, schools can play a vital role in supporting recovery and adjustment.

As these complex experiences show, conversations about student needs can evoke strong emotions and differing perspectives. Approaching these discussions with intentionality, transparency, and respect helps keep the focus on student well being and shared goals. With this foundation, schools can begin setting the conditions for difficult conversations that strengthen connection and support.

Setting the Stage for Difficult Conversations in Your School Community

Understanding the diverse experiences of students is only the first step. The next is creating conditions where educators, families, and community members can talk openly about these challenges in ways that strengthen connection and support. This requires intentional strategies for navigating difficult conversations. Consider the following steps to have these conversations:

1. **Identify and openly communicate about the issues and student needs** in your community.
   - Which students/student population are you worried about and why?
   - What are their core needs that are not being met?
   - Do these students share a trauma type/experience? Can you identify the cause(s) of the trauma?
   - What in the school ecosystem is supporting these students? What is harmful?
   - What would you like to see changed?

2. **Set community expectations for transparency and collaboration.**
   - Humans need belonging and shared purpose—clear expectations strengthen collaboration.
   - Conflict can feel threatening and set off strong emotions–acknowledge this openly.
   - Heightened emotions can affect reasoning–build space for calm, reflective dialogue.
   - Everyone needs to feel heard–active listening supports transparency and trust.
   - People may withdraw or react defensively–establishing norms helps keep discussions productive.
   - When dialogue breaks down, misunderstandings can grow and people may feel dismissed or disrespected–clear expectations help maintain respect and shared goals.

3. **Ensure leadership affirms and upholds shared norms and expectations.**
   - Hold everyone in the school community responsible for contributing to a positive school climate.
   - Commit to dialogue grounded in mutual regard, allowing for disagreement without dehumanizing or vilifying others.
   - Take intentional steps to cultivate understanding, strengthen relationships, and ensure that all community members feel respected and valued.

4. **Create shared agreements** for how your community will learn, grow, and work together, even in disagreement.
   - Collaboration and mutuality are core principles for a trauma-informed school community.
   - Shared agreements consist of three to five core guiding values that are named, practiced, and affirmed together.
   - These shared expectations support both students and the staff by creating consistency, safety, and a sense of belonging.

5. **Recognize that everyone—students, staff, and community members—need their identity, perspectives, contributions, and experiences acknowledged and respected.**
   - Being seen, heard, valued, and understood is essential for feeling included, safe, and connected.
   - When differences are not acknowledged or respected, feelings of discomfort, sadness, frustration, and anger may arise.
   - Effective communication is not about being “right” but about creating an environment where diverse perspectives are welcomed and embraced.
   - Building bridges requires curiosity and openness—seeking to understand where others are coming from and why they hold their beliefs, even when you don’t share them.

Having the Difficult Conversation

In a school environment, conversations can vary significantly. Some discussions are planned, allowing for preparation and thoughtful consideration, while others arise unexpectedly, often requiring immediate responses. Understanding this distinction helps you manage yourself and engage constructively in any situation. No matter what kind of conversation you find yourself in, remember to practice self-compassion and kindness to yourself.

Planned Conversations

When you have time to plan, start by identifying the type of conversation that is meaningful for the relationship and how it connects to your goals. Dr. Dana Crawford's work about tender conversations (https://www.drdanacrawford.com/) identifies three types of conversations that you could have and how their processes differ depending on your goals for the conversation.

Type 1. I want to give more information
For this type of conversation, try to stay objective and point out evidence. Goals include keeping the interaction non-personal and avoiding emotional charging.

Type 2. I want to preserve my relationship
For this type of conversation, try to have grace with your conversation partners and invite them into connection. This might include validating their concerns, easing into contentious topics, and a good deal of planning to balance any complexity. If you are new to working with the person, start the conversation with something you have in common.

Type 3. I want to speak up for what I believe
For this type of conversation, try to center your thinking around your whys and values. Focus on expressing your needs and maintaining your integrity, rather than controlling the outcome.

Preparing for the conversation:

1) Once you've chosen the type of conversation you would like to have, identify strategies to support your goals, including tone, emphasis, and word choice.

2) Consider what preparation might help—discussing your approach with a trusted colleague or practicing what you plan to say.

3) Clarify your goals and prioritize outcomes that reflect shared values and student well-being.

During the conversation:

1) Ground the conversation in values.

- Share stories that reflect your values to help others understand your perspective.
- Highlight values you share collectively to establish common ground.
- Use shared values as anchors to guide the discussion and define boundaries.
- Focus on areas that are within your ability to influence or change.

2) Foster a psychologically safe environment.

- Ensure you are regulated and clear about your goals and messages.
- Focus on areas that are within your and your conversation partner's mutual ability to influence or change.
- Encourage curiosity by asking open-ended questions that invite reflection rather than defensiveness.

3) Engage with clarity and respect.

- Listen actively and show that you are considering the other person's perspective.
- Avoid jargon, slogans, or emotionally loaded language.
- If emotions rise or the conversation veers off track, return to shared values.
- If the space can't remain safe or constructive, politely pause or conclude the discussion.

Unplanned Conversations

There are times when a conversation feels necessary, but you don't have time to plan ahead. In these situations, pausing to reflect can help determine whether engaging right now will bring clarity, connection, and student well-being or whether it's better to wait for a more intentional moment. Here are some reflections that can support you in determining whether to enter into an unplanned, difficult conversation.

Determining whether to enter into an unplanned, difficult conversation	
Check-in with yourself	Am I in the right headspace to have this conversation right now or should I reach out to the person at another time? Is a conversation the best path forward or should I be taking other actions? Am I seeing actions that are directly harming students? If so, it may require immediate and direct action. Is this the right person and setting for the conversation? Is it safe for me to engage with this person, or would someone else be better suited to have this discussion?
Set your own boundaries	If you determine you are not in the right headspace, or that the person or setting is not appropriate, then firmly and clearly communicate that you do not want or have the capacity to have the conversation in that moment. *i. For example: "I hear that this is important, but this isn't a good time for me. Let's schedule a time this week when we can talk in private and have more time."* If there are conditions that limit your willingness to have the discussion, communicate those clearly and kindly. *i. For example: "I'm willing to have this conversation but would like to suggest XYZ person to join as well."* Identify shared values that can help delineate boundaries in a supportive manner. *i. For example: "I think we can find common ground wanting our students to feel supported and safe. Even if we take different approaches, we all want our students to thrive."* If you determine you are not in the right headspace, or that the person or setting is not appropriate, then firmly and clearly communicate that you do not want or have the capacity to have the conversation in that moment. *i. For example, "I want to give this conversation the attention it deserves, but I'm not in the right headspace to do that right now. I'm going to pause here and let's schedule another time for us to fully discuss the situation."*
Clarify goals for the conversation	Determine what you can achieve in the moment and what may need follow-up. Consider starting with shared stories that highlight each person's values, as these can help others understand the perspective you're bringing into the conversation. Highlight shared values to foster understanding and guide the conversation toward student needs.
Monitor the conversation	Does the other person seem open to having a conversation or do they seem to have made up their mind already? Decide when it is healthy to stop engaging if progress cannot be made.

Whether a conversation is planned or unplanned, it is important to care for yourself during and after the exchange. Acknowledge the energy these discussions require and celebrate the willingness to engage and advocate for students' well-being. Be kind to yourself and remember that doing your best in navigating a difficult and often emotionally charged topic is meaningful.

Tending to Your Whole Self by Staying Regulated to Engage and Connect

In our work with children, we know we must attend to the whole child. Yet, we often forget the importance of tending to our own whole selves. When we nurture our physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual needs, we feel more grounded and balanced, and better able to manage challenges as they arise. Wholeness invites us to recognize that these different dimensions of well-being are interconnected and that caring for ourselves means attending to each of them.

Supporting Your Whole Self in Hard Conversations	
Spiritual (your connection to the world and your place in it)	Take time to reflect on why you are in education. This can help you stay grounded and authentic in the face of school challenges. Reflection questions: *How does this situation connect to my purpose in education? What values guide my next steps with students/colleagues?*
Emotional (your awareness of feelings and ability to process and express them)	Build strong relationships based on trust and compassion to foster a sense of safety and connection. Reflection questions: *What emotions am I feeling right now? How can I show empathy toward students or colleagues?*
Physical (your care for your body and attention to rest, movement, and nourishment)	Be aware of body signals during stress or conflict at school and encourage physical self-care through movement breaks and healthy routines to support overall well-being. Reflection questions: *Am I rested, nourished, and physically prepared to face this challenge? What signals is my body giving me?*
Mental (your capacity for wisdom, clarity, reflection, and focused thinking)	Promote self-awareness, develop problem-solving skills, and foster a growth mindset among students and staff. Being open to new perspectives can help you navigate difficult challenges with greater understanding. Reflection questions: *What new perspectives or ideas can I bring to support students or staff? How can I clarify my intentions before addressing this issue?*

> ***"Tending to your whole self is an act of service, not self-indulgence. When educators stay regulated and rooted, they create the stability students need during challenging moments."***

Conclusion

Creating safe, supportive school environments requires engaging in challenging conversations with transparency, compassion, and mutual respect. These conversations help foster understanding, build empathy, and acknowledge the diverse experiences of students.

When difficult conversations are avoided or shut down, students' well-being may be negatively affected. A trauma-informed, healing-centered approach supports the creation of spaces where all members of your school community feel seen, heard, and valued.

This work involves ongoing commitment to both personal and collective growth. It requires caring for physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental well-being while maintaining clear boundaries and shared expectations. Failing to engage transparently and collaboratively risks perpetuating harm and alienation, undermining the well-being of school communities. Respectful dialogue, shared values, and practices that promote belonging and empowerment help create school environments where children are supported to thrive.

Grounding in practices of care and reflection provides clarity in navigating challenging times and conversations. Returning to a shared purpose–the well-being of students–guides these efforts and fosters communities that address trauma while promoting healing, growth, and belonging for every child.

Across all school roles – greeting students at the front desk, serving meals in the cafeteria, maintaining facilities, providing transportation, supporting instruction, or leading administrative functions – clear and intentional communication is an essential part of trauma-informed daily practice.

CITATION:
Calder, J., Lau Johnson, W.F., Rowe, A., Curry, C., Grossman, H., Smith, M., & Brymer, M. (2026). Building Safer Spaces: A Trauma-Informed Guide to Difficult Conversations in Schools. Los Angeles, CA & Durham, NC. UCLA-Duke University National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.