Overcoming Adversity

A Limited Liability Company

A Guide for Compassionate Schools

Compassionate Schools Overview

Extensive studies have prompted the CDC to identify adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) as indicators for physical, mental, and emotional health risks. Studies reveal that exposure to physical or emotional abuse, neglect, or household dysfunction can have lasting negative impacts. Growing up in a household with a parent who suffers mental illness, observing or experiencing violence in the home, having an incarcerated parent, growing up in a high-poverty area, or other barriers to health and safety can have lasting impacts into adulthood. ACEs have been shown to significantly impact emotional regulation and cognitive development in children. Toxic stress, or repeated exposure to stress without protective factors, can cause deficits in attention, decision-making, and learning.

If not addressed, ACEs can lead to chronic health problems, mental illness, and negative coping patterns such as increased risk for drug or alcohol use or engaging in other unhealthy lifestyle choices. The original ACE study by Kaiser Permanente observed that individuals with four or more ACEs are at higher risk of these negative outcomes. Those having six or more ACEs are in danger of reduced life expectancy up to twenty years.

However, there is hope. The way to combat these serious risks to wellbeing is to promote resilience through protective and restorative factors. Compassionate schools equipped with trauma-informed practices provide a culture of nurturing and safety. When educators are empowered with practical tools such as responsive classroom, mindfulness, and sensory regulation techniques, a thriving community of learning is established.

Dr. Karyn Purvis and the Harvard Institute for the Child report sensory integration to be groundbreaking in terms of restoring what was lost during cognitive and emotional development in children with toxic stress. Achieving and maintaining "serve and return" patterns of healthy attachment is essential to resilience. Such healthy patterns are achieved through positive relationships with caregivers and non-family adults, such as teachers. Once trust is restored, new neural pathways can be formed. Children can experience renewed brain function to regain attention, decision-making, and healthy response to stress once their basic needs for safety and love are met.

"What is damaged in relationships can be healed in relationships."

- Dr. Karyn Purvis

What are the benefits of a Trauma-Informed program?

- Improved academic achievement and test scores.
- Improved school climate.
- Increased teacher sense of satisfaction and safety.
- Improved retention of new teachers.
- Reduction of student behavioral out-burst and referrals to the office.
- Reduction of stress for staff and students.
- Reduction in absences, detentions, and suspensions.
- Reduction in student bullying and harassment.
- Reduction in the need for special educational services/classes.
- Reduction in drop-outs.

Leadership Commitment

Integration of trauma sensitivity begins with the administration by committing that all students will be safe inside the school, on the school grounds, and on the buses. The framework of total security, primarily emotional security (also termed felt-safety), will become the primary focus. The power of relationships will be acknowledged and practiced, with every student being assigned a staff member in a caring supportive team relationship. Building a school climate based upon meeting the basic physical, emotional, and connection needs sets the stage for a thriving culture of learning. The same sensitivity is extended to all staff, fostering connection and trust at every level.

What is sensory integration?

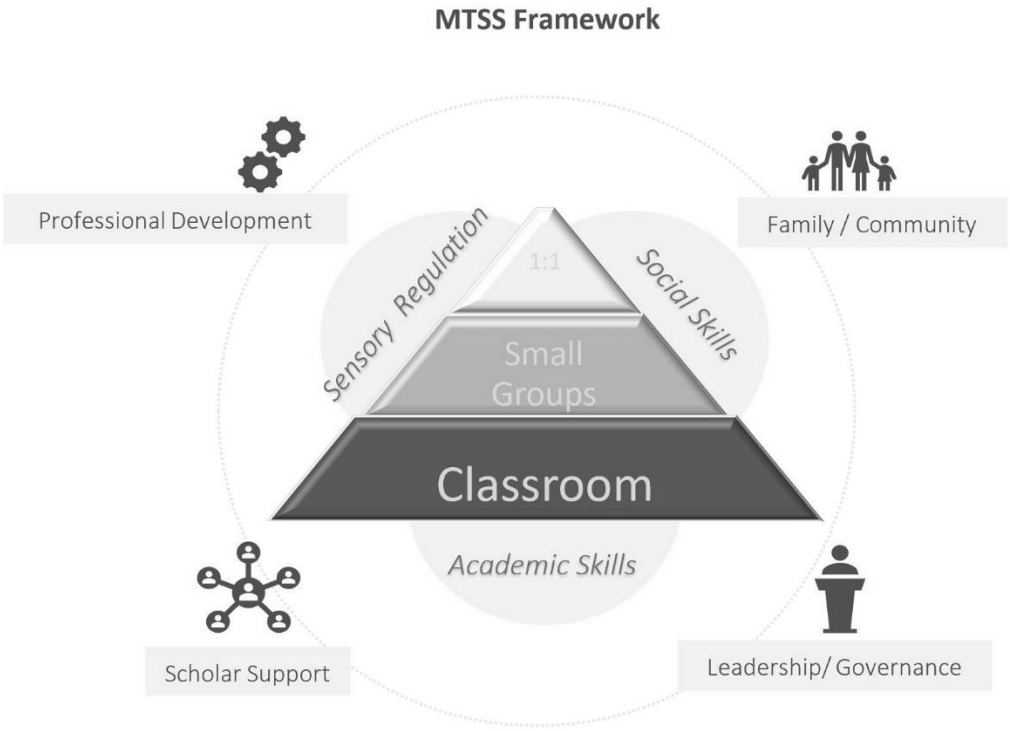
The five senses help us hear, see, smell, taste and touch to interact with our world. During the early stages of child development, the utilization or underutilization of each of these senses determines how we process information from our environment. If a student has experienced neglect or abuse, he or she may require much more or much less of each type of sensory input in order to make sense of his or her environment. This is known as sensory "seeking" (trying to gain more input such as loud noises or physical touch), or sensory "avoiding" (trying to escape loud noises or scratchy fabrics). When children are overstimulated or under-stimulated, it makes learning take a back seat. The utilization of sensory resources during school hours serves to regulate children so that they are able to get the input they need to focus at school. The key to fully implementing a trauma-informed or compassionate environment centers on the utilization of sensory regulation to combat the negative impacts of trauma and toxic stress.

Why should we utilize it?

Research shows that for every hour of sensory regulation students achieve up to four hours of uninterrupted (no outbursts or disruptive behaviors) learning time! Sensory regulation encourages awareness of emotions, energy level, and how to utilize healthy coping strategies at all ages.

How do we implement sensory regulation as a Whole Child initiative?

A Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) from a trauma-informed perspective ensures that each child is achieving his or her highest potential by creating opportunities for intervention targeting academics, social skills, and sensory regulation according to individual needs. This infographic provides a snapshot of the different supports employed to benefit students' learning both socially and academically:



The Whole Child Approach highlights the relationship between education and physical and emotional health. Each child learns best when he or she is HEALTHY, SAFE, ENGAGED, SUPPORTED, & CHALLENGED. For scholars to achieve success academically and socially families, schools, and communities must work together!

Learning Opportunities

Adverse Childhood Experiences

In-services on Adverse Childhood Experiences, trauma's effects on development, and the need for sensory regulation is presented to all staff- teaching, non-teaching, and volunteers. Administrators, educators, counselors, Occupational Therapists, and other specialized support staff are presented not only with eye-opening research on ACEs and child cognitive and emotional development, but are also provided with strategies to meet students' basic needs through morning meetings, circles, and check-ins.

The Alert Program

The Alert Program is introduced in training to ensure that a universal approach for checking in is utilized. This program, created by Mary Sue Williams and Sherry Shellenberger, is developmentally appropriate for K+ grades and provides common language for staff and children when gauging readiness to learn. The focus of the program is to monitor states of alertness and empower children to employ sensory regulation strategies throughout the day to achieve optimum focus. Periods of movement are followed by periods of concentration are the key elements to minimizing interfering behaviors and increase learning.

Support Staff & Specialist Training

Support staff and other specialists are Introduced to Alert Program and shown how to record pre and post-intervention data when using the sensory pathway and regulation room. Coaching follow-ups for these staff including case study table talks and data evaluation are encouraged.

Students

Alert Program is introduced as a part of the Whole Child initiative encouraging safe school climate and students are taught to utilize the check-in for self-awareness. Zones of Regulation curriculum is delivered through classroom guidance lessons, morning meeting time, or during specials. Once they have the appropriate language and tools delivered on their level, children are empowered to self-identify their needed level of sensory input or avoidance to achieve an optimal state of alertness for learning. Students are introduced to sensory resources: sensory pathway, regulation station, and sensory bins on a class-by-class basis at the school level.

Resources

Sensory Pathway

A research-supported sensory pathway will be installed in the hallway to provide brain breaks, mindful breathing, and overall sensory regulation throughout the school day. Crossing the middle line, gaining proprioceptive and vestibular input, and controlled, mindful breathing are all valuable skills gained while utilizing the pathway.

Students will hop-scotch, balance, tip-toe, and wall-push (heavy work) to get neural-pathway-forming sensory input that they all need during a long school day. Once they have journeyed the pathway, there is an opportunity for mindful calm down breathing, so students return to class at the appropriate level of alertness, ready to learn.

Installation of a sensory pathway is a creative way to incorporate mindfulness and movement into the school day. The K-8 developmentally appropriate, three-tiered resource is centrally located in the hallway and can be easily accessed for whole class, small group, or individual scholar use. The pathway is an essential MTSS intervention for academic and social-emotional support. Teachers, counselors, occupational therapists or other support professionals may access it before, during, or after sessions to enhance focus and learning. Data tools may be utilized for success monitoring.

Sensory Bins

Regulation bins full of sensory fidgets and calming tools provide sensory regulation opportunities inside the classroom to prevent unnecessary time out of class due to behavior. Fidgets and mindfulness activities are utilized as a universal resource to be utilized by all students to support social and academic learning. This universal resource may be utilized as a self-regulation opportunity in all general education, special education, special area, and resource classrooms. These bins provide a universal academic and social emotional support with self-report data tracking tools to be utilized by students.

Sensory Regulation Room

This one-on-one resource provides a dedicated space for support service professionals to work with children who need more sensory input, also known as heavy work opportunities, to achieve an optimum state of alertness. Typical resources found in a sensory regulation room include a crash pad, battle ropes, stepping-stones, bubble towers, sensory wall installations, and the like. Occupational therapists, school counselors, school behavior health counselors, and other specialized support staff benefit by first utilizing the Alert check-in, employing the room resources by assessing student's individual needs, and recording post-intervention data. Ninety percent of students achieved the optimal state of alertness following targeted sensory regulation. Research also supports the increased academic and social learning when basic needs are met and sensory integration is utilized in conjunction with the schoolwide check-in system.

We spend time meeting children's emotional needs by filling their cups with love or we spend time dealing with behaviors from those unmet needs. Either way, we spend the time.

– Pam Lee

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