GCU
CANYON CENTER FOR CHARACTER EDUCATION

Activities and Applications:
Integrating Character Development and Trauma-Informed Practices in PK-12 Settings

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Introduction and Authorship

Introduction

Every student carries a story.
Every student has a unique mix of experiences, strengths, and challenges. For some, their story includes moments of challenge, instability, or loss. Such experiences can shape how they learn, connect, and see themselves. These experiences can also disrupt learning, relationships, and emotional well-being. As educators and leaders, we can't rewrite those chapters, but we can help write the next ones. We hold both the responsibility and the privilege of helping every child feel safe, valued, and capable of growth. This book was created to support this mission by uniting two powerful approaches: trauma-informed practices and character development.

By blending trauma-informed practices with character development, this book gives you the tools to foster safety, trust, belonging and resilience while also growing students' character virtues, such as empathy, perseverance, and integrity. It's practical, research-based, and ready to use in the real world of PK–12 schools.

Drawing on the expertise of educators, researchers, and practitioners from diverse fields, this resource offers more than theory. It is a bridge between research and action. It is grounded in evidence-based strategies and practical wisdom, equipping educators with tools to meet the unique needs of students who have experienced trauma.

You'll find activities, strategies, and reflections that are not only trauma-sensitive but also character-centered to meet students where they are, supporting both healing and growth. By weaving these approaches together, we can help all students, especially those impacted by trauma, develop the skills and strengths they need to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

This book is designed to be a living companion in your practice. Whether you are a classroom teacher, counselor, specialist, or school leader, you will find actionable steps, flexible activities, and clear processes that you can adapt to your specific context. Every tool is rooted in research, tested in real-world classrooms, and aligned with the goal of creating safe, supportive learning environments that nurture the whole child.

Acknowledgements and Authorship

This book was made possible through the generous support of the Jubilee Center for Character and Virtues and The Kern Family Foundation. Their investment enabled the Canyon Center for Character Education at Grand Canyon University (CCCE) to partner with Victory Schools Charter Network (VS) in exploring how to better equip educators to meet the needs of all students.

Victory Schools leadership recognized a growing reality that more students were arriving with experiences of trauma, and educators were striving to meet not only their academic needs, but also their social, emotional, and character development. Their commitment to serving the whole child inspired this collaboration.

The CCCE team previously developed a similar resource centered around character development, the Activities and Applications Book for Character Development in PK12 Schools, and were called to this opportunity to expand that work in partnership with Victory Schools. Together, CCCE and VS joined with additional experts in character development and trauma-informed practices to create the resource. Aspiring to support more educators and leaders around the world in the pursuit of human flourishing, the two teams paired up with other experts to create this resource for you. Our shared aspiration is simple yet profound: to support educators and school leaders everywhere in fostering environments where all students can heal, grow, and flourish.

This book is the result of the shared vision, expertise, and dedication of a diverse group of educators, researchers, and practitioners committed to supporting the whole child. We extend our deepest gratitude to the contributing experts in character development and trauma-informed practices whose knowledge, insight, and lived experience shaped every page of this resource.

Each contributor brought unique perspectives from their work in classrooms, counseling, leadership, and community engagement, ensuring that the strategies and activities presented here are grounded in research, informed by practice, and responsive to the realities of PK–12 education.

Special thanks to those who offered case studies, piloted activities, and provided critical feedback during the development process. Your willingness to share your time, wisdom, and passion for this work has made this book possible.

Authorship is shared among all contributors, whose names and professional affiliations are listed below. While the chapters may reflect individual voices, the heart of this work lies in our collective commitment to creating safe, supportive, and character-rich environments for all students.

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How to Use This Book

This isn't a book you have to read cover-to-cover. Think of it as a toolkit you can dip into anytime. What is provided is not a curriculum or a program, but resources to inform your practices how you see fit. Trauma- sensitive approaches and character education are holistic, comprehensive, and individualized based on the needs of the community.

The book is structured following the Framework for Purposeful Cultures of Character, developed by the Canyon Center for Character Education at Grand Canyon University. The CCCE Framework comprises three main components for creating a culture centered on character through Individual Learning, Leading a Community with Character, and Serving with Character. Individual Learning is about knowing your own character and how you came to be so you can consider your continual growth and the way in which you model for others. Leading a Community focuses on relationships, a shared vision and language, core values, whole community involvement, and whole community implementation. Serving involves empowering, teaching, and cultivating through intentional activities and practices related to human flourishing. Each of these components can support the cohesive and continuous formation of cultures of character and enhance character formation with organizational stakeholders. This book follows the three domains in the way you must understand your own character and trauma before supporting and modeling for others. Schools should consider all foundational elements of the school community and prioritize this work before moving forward with activity integration. The Serving section provides activities for educators and leaders to integrate trauma-informed, character-focused practice.

We encourage you to learn about the *Foundations*. In this section, you can learn more about what trauma is, what trauma-informed practice looks like, the research and approaches behind character education, and how it all connects. This research-based section provides the grounding knowledge necessary for effective implementation of trauma-informed and character-focused practice.

The following section, *Individual Knowledge*, shares how your own trauma and awareness impact your practice and well-being. This section also includes self-reflection tools to help you consider your own experiences, values, and capacity because effective support for students begins with self-awareness. Take time for self-reflection in this section. You are your most important tool.

In *Leading a School Community*, you can build your school readiness. This section offers guidance for establishing the conditions in which trauma-informed, character-centered work can flourish. Learn how to create the conditions for trust, safety, and shared values, with practical guidance for leaders, teams, and administrators.

In the *Serving* section of the book, you can focus on research-based background knowledge and actionable approaches to addressing specific needs. In the largest part of the book, you can flip to chapters on different causes of trauma to find background, impacts on students, and ready-to-use activities for one-on-one, small group, or whole-class work.

Each chapter follows the same structure for ease of use:

Background – Research-based understanding of the trauma type, including attachment and connection principles;
Impact on Students – How the trauma may affect students socially, emotionally, cognitively, and physically;
Activities & Practical Approaches – For one-on-one support, for small groups, for various grade levels;
Where to Get Additional Support – Resources for educators, students, and families.

This organization allows you to find exactly what you need, whether you're responding to a specific student's needs or planning proactive, schoolwide programming. Activities come with clear instructions, options for different grade levels, and/or reflection prompts so you can adapt them to your students and your context. Many activities can be applicable for addressing any cause of trauma or whole group approaches to building community and a safe environment. Tab the activities you find most applicable to your setting!

Throughout this book, you'll encounter short stories from schools, educators, and leaders that bring the ideas to life in real-world ways. We hope these stories inspire you and spark new ways of thinking about your own work. You'll also find "stop-to-reflect" moments. View these as little invitations to pause, consider how the ideas connect to your role, and engage more deeply with the material. Think of them as small checkpoints on your journey through the book.

A Note on Self-Care and Sustainability

Working with students who have experienced trauma can be deeply rewarding, but it can also be emotionally demanding. Throughout the book, you'll find reminders and tools for protecting your own well-being. Sustained, compassionate work requires that you care for yourself so you can be fully present for your students.

You can't do everything at once and you don't have to. Start small. Try one activity. Have one new conversation. Build one stronger connection.

When trauma-informed care meets character education, we don't just help students cope with the past. We help them believe in their future. By combining trauma-informed strategies with character development, we can help students move beyond surviving to truly thriving and growing in resilience, empathy, and the skills needed to lead meaningful, ethical lives. This book is your guide, toolkit, and companion in that journey.

The Story of Victory Schools

Between 2014 and 2016, I began shaping the vision that would become Victory Collegiate Academy, which launched in the fall of 2017. At that time, *social-emotional learning (SEL)* wasn't a buzzword. It wasn't a line item in district budgets, it wasn't headlining education conferences, and it certainly wasn't viewed as a "must-have" by policymakers. But from years in the classroom and as an administrator, I knew the traditional model was failing far too many kids.

The wall I kept running into was simple but devastating: schools in high-poverty, underserved communities — those with the highest rates of free and reduced lunch — were not meeting the whole child. Students were coming through our doors carrying the realities of poverty, incarcerated parents, power shut-offs, trauma, and unstable housing. Yet schools were addressing none of it.

Instead, I saw "character education" delivered as a once-a-month assembly where a handful of students were recognized with a certificate. That was never going to be enough. Students needed to learn how to regulate their emotions, communicate effectively, build empathy, practice basic human politeness, and develop resilience — the skills that last long after a test.

Out of that conviction, we built what we call our Healthy Body • Healthy Mind • Whole Child approach. Academics matter, but so do nutrition, physical wellness, social-emotional learning, and character education. Together, these pillars provide the foundation for student growth.

This vision took shape through the New Schools for Phoenix incubator, where I spent two years studying how to design, plan, and open a charter school. When it came time to launch, my only question was: *Where is the greatest need?* That compass led us directly to Maryvale—a community with incredible resilience but undeniable challenges.

Educational attainment in Maryvale lags far behind state and national averages, with only a small percentage of adults holding a college degree. Crime rates are significantly higher than national averages, and families here regularly face the compounding stresses of poverty, community violence, and instability. In this environment, a school can either be a safe, stabilizing hub that equips students with lasting skills — or another place where children fall through the cracks.
Victory Collegiate Academy was founded to be the former. From day one, SEL and character education were at the heart of what we did.

The evidence is clear, both in our community and in research:

- **Maryvale Context:** Low adult degree attainment and elevated crime create urgent need for schools that build resilience, skills, and opportunity.
- **Student Outcomes:** SEL programs consistently show improved academics, behavior, and long-term social-emotional growth.
- **Trauma Prevalence:** In Maryvale, the number of children experiencing trauma is at least double national rates, making trauma-informed approaches essential.
- **Trauma-Informed Results:** Schools using these strategies see reductions in suspensions and exclusionary discipline, keeping kids in class and learning.

This is why VCA's **Healthy Body • Healthy Mind • Whole Child** approach isn't just a framework — it's the way we deliver education every day.

Victory Collegiate Academy didn't wait for permission or a trend. In 2017, we opened a school built on this model because our kids deserved it.

Academics matter, but they are not enough. To truly prepare students for the future, you must equip them with the skills, relationships, and character that make success possible. That has been our mission since day one.

Nick Schuerman, CEO of Victory Schools

Foundational Background

What is Trauma and Trauma Informed Practices

What is trauma?

Trauma is a word that is being thrown around a lot in education circles, in social media, and in day to day conversation. Yet, outside of the pop references and causal use, trauma is heightened because scientists are learning about the way trauma is a global issue, impacting children, teens, adults and communities in ways that can affect health and quality of life throughout the lifespan (Anda et al, 2006, p. 175).

Trauma can be defined as "too much, too soon, or too fast" for a person's nervous system to handle (Banschick, 2015, para. 9). It may come from events such as an accident, crime, natural disasters, abuse, neglect and more (APA, n.d., para. 1). In addition, studies show that early life stressors combined with factors related to resilience can result in trauma. While all children have elements of resilience that support them in recovery from difficult events, factors such temperament, coping skills, context specific environmental stressors, the quality of close and supportive relationships, and the number of resources or available services and supports can affect how much overwhelm the child's system experiences and therefore the impact of trauma on the individual (NCTSN, n.d.b.; Knight & Miller, 2024).

Prevalence of Trauma

Surprisingly, the prevalence of trauma or Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) in an individual's life is much greater than previously thought. One study shows that over 70% of adult respondents in a survey given across six continents had experienced a traumatic event, including events such as witnessing a death or serious injury, being mugged, being in a life-threatening car accident, experiencing a life threatening illness or injury or losing a loved one unexpectedly (Benjet et al., 2016). Women experienced trauma more often than men and are more vulnerable to sexual assault and childhood sexual abuse, with nearly 1 in 4 women in the US experiencing an attempted or completed rape at some times in their lives (Vogt & Mangan, n.d.).

Biology of Trauma

The Greek word τραῦμα (traûma), directly translates to "wound," "hurt," or "injury (Kolaitis et al., 2017). Trauma, at its root, is the inability of the nervous system to handle experience(s) based on factors surrounding the individual (Banschick, 2015, para. 9). Traumatic events can result in biological changes, especially in limbic system functioning, the cortisol levels and neurotransmitter disruptions (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). Individuals may experience a change in their stress responses as well as sleep disturbances and hyperarousal (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). Systems most affected are those that play a role in things like arousal, sleep, attention, appetite, mood, and impulse regulation (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006).

These biological changes result in shifts in the nervous system that can affect the individual for life. For example, a person may struggle with hyperarousal, or the body's way of staying prepared and identifying threats (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). They may respond to situations as if they are dangerous with overreactions and snap responses when circumstances in reality are safe (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). In addition, they may more often enter the stress responses of fight-or-flight and secrete increased levels of hormones in this state (Chu et al, 2024). Memory, attention, and regulation may all be affected as well (Thomson & Punski-Hoogervorst, n.d.). Another way to consider this is that trauma turns on the body's alarm system and this throws it into constant survival mode in which it is very sensitive and can easily and constantly be triggered (Seigel & Bryson, 2011). As there is not a complete description of the underlying processes for each cause of trauma or mental disorder, it is recommended to consult the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DMS) for a classification of mental disorders and description of how they are expressed for recognition (APA, 2013).

Types of Trauma

Because trauma affects individuals differently, there are many ways in which a person can experience an event that may result in trauma. A lot of research has been done on adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs, to identify common experiences that result in symptoms of trauma for a significant number of people. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) defines ACEs as "potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years)" (CDC, 2024, para 1). These may include the experience of violence, abuse or neglect all the way to experiences that may undermine a child's sense of safety, stability or bonding in the environment, such as caregivers with substance use problems, mental health problems or parental separation (CDC, 2024). These events can be big "T" events, which include large events, such as mass traumas, natural disasters, military combat or overt abuse (Cleveland Clinic, 2023). They can also be little "t" trauma events, which may affect individuals in very different ways based on context, resilience, genes, and protective factors. These could be things such as loss of a pet, divorce, bullying, or sudden moving or relocation (Cleveland Clinic, 2023). Often trauma is categorized into three main types based on the duration and nature of the event (Jae, 2024). These three types are acute, chronic and complex. Acute trauma results from a single distressing event, which comes on with suddenness and intensity (Jae, 2024). Chronic trauma is a prolonged or repeated exposure to distressing situations (Jae, 2024). Finally, complex trauma is exposure to multiple, repeated traumatic events, such as childhood abuse or ongoing domestic violence (Jae, 2024). Within these three types of trauma, there are countless types of events that might occur, such as the following.

Exposure to Violence or Abuse
Trauma can also be caused by physical violence, such as being mugged or attacked; experiencing physical abuse or intimate partner violence; or events of sexual violence such as rape, assault, stalking, human trafficking or grooming of minors (Feriante & Sharma, 2023). Emotional abuse can also result in trauma, such as yelling, emotional manipulation or controlling behaviors (Feriante & Sharma, 2023). Combat, armed conflict, explosure to war, terrorism, torture or refugeeism can also fall in this category (Feriante & Sharma, 2023). Finally, witnessing any of these events can also result in trauma.

Accidents and Disasters
Trauma may come from accidents or disaster events. These could be natural disasters, such as tornadoes, hurricanes, fires or earthquakes (Feriante & Sharma, 2023). Motor vehicle accidents, chemical spills, or other accidents that result in harm are included in this category as well (Feriante & Sharma, 2023). This may also include illnesses with sudden onset or sudden physical harm (Feriante & Sharma, 2023).

Loss and Separation
Trauma can occur when an individual experiences loss or separation. This can include the sudden loss of a loved one, homelessness or housing instability, and real or perceived neglect or abandonment (Feriante & Sharma, 2023).

Other Trauma Events
Other trauma events can include an "extreme sense of powerlessness as well as a disruption of beliefs and expectations" (Kleber, 2019, para. 4). Religious trauma is a type of trauma in which an individual suffers trauma at the hands of their religious beliefs or religious structures (Singh et al., 2024). Long-term or chronic stress can also result in complex trauma.

Effects and Symptoms of Trauma

Trauma results in biological changes that affect a person and produce common symptoms. Trauma does affect every person differently and each person has a different set of circumstances in which to deal with the trauma, resulting in a wide array of symptoms (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). Immediately following trauma, individuals may experience physical reactions such as sweating or nausea, emotional reactions, such as sadness or overwhelm; cognitive reactions such as difficulty with concentrating or memory; and behavioral reactions such as avoidance, or restlessness (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). As time extends beyond the initial event, a person may begin to develop depression or anxiety, have sleep disturbances or appetite changes, may experience flashbacks or suicidal thinking, and may withdrawal from relationships (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).

Effects of trauma may look different in young children than in adults. Young children may struggle to form attachments, have changes in their eating or sleeping, show signs of developmental regression and experience separation anxiety or excessive fear (Bartlett & Steber, 2019). School-age children may fixate on safety, re-enact the trauma event in play, have frequent nightmares and experience school difficulties, such as challenges with focus and concentration and aggressive or withdrawn behaviors (Bartlett & Steber, 2019). Adolescents may become anxious or depressed, engage in more risk-taking or self-destructive behaviors, or feel intense guilt, anger or shame (Bartlett & Steber, 2019). For a complete description of possible effects and symptoms that practitioners may look for, consult the DSM-5 (APA, 2013).

Symptoms of trauma are often grouped into four categories:

(Kolis & Houston-Kolnik, 2018)

Re-experiencing
Re-experiencing includes symptoms such as nightmares or flashbacks, often triggered by memories or sensory experiences (Kolis & Houston-Kolnik, 2018).

Avoidance
Individuals may avoid places or objects that remind them of the traumatic event (Kolis & Houston-Kolnik, 2018). They may also avoid thoughts or feelings related to the trauma, which may result in a person avoiding conflict or real or perceived threats to safety (Kolis & Houston-Kolnik, 2018).

Arousal or Reactivity Symptoms
Symptoms in this category include irritability, difficulty sleeping, violent outbursts, or startle reflexes (Kolis & Houston-Kolnik, 2018). They could also manifest as hypervigilance, a heightened state of awareness, or guardedness (Kolis & Houston-Kolnik, 2018).

Cognitive or Mood Symptoms
Individuals with these types of symptoms may have feelings of guilt and shame, negative views of themselves or the world or even an inability to feel positive emotions (Kolis & Houston-Kolnik, 2018). They may numb emotions, isolate themselves, or suppress memories (Kolis & Houston-Kolnik, 2018).

Responding to Trauma

The first step in responding to trauma is to understand trauma. Being able to take into account a broad understanding of typical stress reactions and responses to trauma will allow for interactions, goals, and services to be more appropriately implemented for the individual (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). We know that children are more likely to be resilient when implementing trauma-informed practices (Bartlett & Steber, 2019). As educators, it is crucial to understand the difference between a person's character or decision making and biological responses from previous events designed to keep a student's psychological system safe. Trauma-informed approaches specifically recognize a person's stress reactions in order to help them recalibrate the stress system and face challenges more adaptively (Siegel & Bryson, 2011).

In addition to understanding trauma, responding to trauma appropriately can be best approached using six key principles that can be generalized across settings to support individuals (Maynard et al, 2019).

Safety

The first of these principles is safety (Maynard et al, 2019). Creating a safe environment and prioritizing a sense of safety can be done through classroom layout, creating safe spots in environments, and reducing the amount of unpredictable change in environment (Perez, 2021). Psychological safety is important as well and can be achieved through consistent classroom rules, positive and supportive language use, and anticipation of changes or situations that might make a student feel unsafe, such as a fire drill or having a new teacher in the room (Perez, 2021).

Trustworthiness and Transparency

When considering strategies, approaches or policies, it is important to ensure they are visible, clearly described and support trust and transparency in relationships (Parker & Johnson, 2022). Building trust with a child from a trauma-informed lens can include things such as taking time to talk with them and using active listening strategies while accepting feelings, emotions and points of view (Cornbluth, n.d.). Trust can also be built by encouraging healthy expression and promoting a sense of control (Cornbluth, n.d.). Being patient and supportive, maintaining consistency in structure and routines, and creating a place of comfort, security and peace for the child are also important strategies for building trust and promoting clear and transparent communication (Cornbluth, n.d.). The use of community circles in classrooms can help with transparency and build relationships of trust as teachers and peers discuss things in supportive ways (Office of the State Superintendent of Education, n.d.). In addition, strategies such as building a Student Advisory Committee or providing Family and Student Surveys to promote better voice and choice can build transparency, trustworthiness and overall support healthy relationships as students recover from trauma (Office of the State Superintendent of Education, n.d.).

Peer Support

Supporting individuals in building mutual and respectful relationships with peers is an important principle in supporting individuals who have experienced trauma (Parker & Johnson, 2022). Fostering strong relationships and supporting the growth of social emotional skills are also helpful in expanding peer support (NCTSN, n.d.b.). Strong relationships can be fostered through intentional culture building in the classroom, utilizing literacy as a way to build social perspective taking skills, and even discussing, role playing and modeling social skills and strategies students can use (Cervantes & Gutierrez, 2019). In addition, there are a variety of classroom strategies that can promote peer connections and relationships, such as the use of community circles in the classroom (Office of the State Superintendent of Education, n.d.). Community circles can be a tool in allowing all students to be heard while also equalizing power and creating an opportunity for repair and restorative justice. By focusing on connections among students and fostering strong relationships and social emotional skills, students not only have stronger peer connections and interactions, but also have an improved student experience and better student outcomes (Cervantes & Gutierrez, 2019).

VS Case Study - Divorced Families:

We were introduced to a 2nd grade student who was struggling to cope with the impact of her parents' divorce. As a team, the classroom teacher, assistant teacher, and Administration provided her with a nurturing environment where she felt safe, heard, and supported. At the same time, staff worked with both parents, offering guidance on how to provide consistent care and reassurance in both homes. By helping the family work together, Victory Schools not only supported the student's emotional well-being but also strengthened the foundation around her, allowing her to stay engaged and confident in school, and feel loved in whatever environment she was in.

VS Case Study - Domestic Violence:

A 7th grade student was carrying the heavy burden of witnessing domestic violence at home. She was navigating not only fear, but guilt and anger amongst other things. Victory Schools became her safe place—a steady environment where she could trust adults, share her feelings, and focus on learning. Staff worked closely with her family to connect them with resources and coached her caregivers on creating safety and consistency at home. Through this support, she began to feel secure again, gaining confidence and the assurance that both school and home could be places of peace and stability.

Collaboration and Mutuality

The principles of collaboration and mutuality are focused on ensuring decisions, policies and practices are made in a collaborative effort. Decision making should be done with balanced power differentials and should include a variety of viewpoints that mutually support all individuals involved (Parker & Johnson, 2022). For example, in schools teachers and community members can promote topics of trauma-informed practices in staff meetings, school trainings, or in resources provided to educators (NEA, 2023). This can help build a common understanding of needs and help to support collaboration within organizations. In classrooms, teachers can include students in decision making through community circles or morning meetings in which students have an opportunity to be heard and directly participate in decision making in the classroom (Office of the State Superintendent of Education, n.d.).

Empowerment, Voice and Choice

This principle focuses on a person's strengths and allows these strengths to be used (Parker & Johnson, 2022). Supporting an individual's voice and choice and giving space for their involvement is critical. Building self-efficacy and building meaning through goals, spiritual or cultural beliefs can also be part of these elements (NCTSN, n.d.b.). Promoting emotional resilience through strength-based approaches includes teaching specific skills and providing resources to help build adaptive and flexible coping skills (NCTSN, n.d.b.). These strategies of providing empowerment and voice are in alignment with the concept that character can be wrought. Character "wrought" refers to a strategy of development, enabling us to form strengths in times of suffering, challenges, and resistance (Gulliford, 2026). Providing students the capacities to forge through times of adversity and empowering them to grow is crucial to their life skills.

Recognizing Cultural Practice & Addressing Historical Trauma

Supporting individuals includes promoting cultural practices that are nurturing and supportive (Parker & Johnson, 2022). Organizations should avoid stereotypes and focus on addressing historical trauma (Parker & Johnson, 2022). This helps to build a sense of safety in home, school, and other contexts (NCTSN, n.d.b.). Schools can provide topics of trauma-informed practices and information on historical trauma in staff meetings, training or resources (NEA, 2023). They can also tailor content of training to types of trauma or contextually relevant elements in the community, such as addiction, migration stress or systemic racism (Koslouski & Chafouleas, 2022) and provide space for teachers and staff to better explore and address unconscious biases (Rush, 2021). In addition, teachers can ensure lessons, texts, examples, and discussion to connect to families, communities and lived experiences of students (Rush, 2021).

VS Case Study - Sexual Abuse:

A second-grade boy at Victory Schools experienced trauma from sexual abuse, which left him fearful, withdrawn, and hesitant to trust adults. Victory teachers, together with community counseling partners, provided a safe space for healing and growth. The character pillar of courage was emphasized, helping him understand that speaking up and facing difficult emotions showed bravery. Through guided support, he began to share his feelings with trusted adults and participate more confidently in class. Counseling services reinforced his progress, and teachers celebrated each small step of courage he demonstrated. Over time, his classroom engagement grew stronger, and he built friendships with peers. Today, he continues to thrive in his classroom, showing resilience rooted in the courage he developed

VS Case Study - Community Violence:

A fifth-grade male student at Victory Schools was navigating the stress of community violence, including repeated threats of being stabbed or robbed after school. These experiences left him fearful, distracted in class, and quick to disengage from learning. Victory teachers worked with him through the character pillar of responsibility, helping him understand that while he could not control his environment, he could control his choices and actions. He learned to take responsibility for his academics by setting small, achievable goals, such as completing homework before leaving school and checking in with a trusted adult daily. Teachers also reinforced responsibility in how he responded to conflict, encouraging him to seek safe solutions rather than react in fear or anger. Over time, he grew more confident, began participating in class consistently, and showed leadership by reminding peers about making responsible choices. By the end of the semester, the student's ability to carry responsibility in both academics and behavior became a source of stability amid the challenges he faced outside of school.

VS Case Study - Immigration:

A ninth-grade student at Victory Schools recently immigrated to the United States and struggled with language barriers and cultural differences. At first, she felt excluded and misunderstood by her peers. Teachers intentionally reinforced the character pillar of tolerance, creating classroom activities where diverse backgrounds were shared and celebrated. The student learned to extend tolerance to herself, giving grace as she adjusted to a new environment. Her classmates, guided by Victory teachers, practiced tolerance by showing patience and inclusion in group work. Over time, she gained confidence, participating more actively in discussions and extracurricular activities. Tolerance created a bridge between her and her peers, easing the isolation she once felt. By year's end, she had become a leader in multicultural events, demonstrating the strength of embracing differences with understanding.

Conclusion

Trauma-informed approaches are becoming more common and refined in the classroom setting, but more must be done to ensure safety and care for students who have experienced trauma. Strategies to enhance trauma-informed prevention and intervention often correlate with social emotional programming and supportive character education as skills for emotional resilience, social problem-solving, safe and supportive relationships are all crucial to implementing a trauma informed environment. Developing character through trauma informed practices, or the thought that character can be "wrought," highlights the possibilities of growth from the experiences students endure. Increasing the direct teaching of skills to help children and youth handle stress, supporting healthy relationships, and the promotion of resilience in communities, classrooms and homes is crucial, both for trauma-informed initiatives, but also for strong social emotional development and the growth of character in individuals (Phung, 2022).

What is Character Education?

Character education refers to the deliberate and systematic endeavor to cultivate in students' fundamental ethical values, moral reasoning, and prosocial behaviors that collectively contribute to the development of sound character. This educational approach is predicated on the conviction that schooling transcends the mere transmission of academic content; rather, it encompasses the nurturing of virtues such as integrity, responsibility, respect, and compassion; qualities essential for fostering ethical citizenship and vibrant communities.

Classical and Philosophical Roots

The philosophical underpinnings of character education date back to classical thinkers such as Aristotle, who underscored the importance of virtue formation through habitual practice and moral deliberation (Arthur, 2003). Aristotle posited that the ultimate goal of education was to cultivate both moral and intellectual virtues, thereby enabling individuals to flourish within the community. Historically, the cultivation of character has remained a central objective of education, particularly in early American schooling, which integrated civic and moral formation alongside literacy and numeracy. Beginning with figures like Plato and Aristotle, education was conceptualized as the cultivation of virtue. For instance, Isocrates asserted that a truly educated individual embodies "decency, sound judgment, and humility" (Carr & Harrison, 2015), emphasizing the inseparability of intellect and moral character.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, philosophers including John Locke argued that virtues held greater significance than mere academic knowledge. The Founding Fathers of Colonial America similarly prioritized moral development, regarding it as indispensable to the health of a democratic society. Rosen (2024) further explains that the Founding Fathers didn't think of the "pursuit of happiness" in terms of fleeting pleasures but as a lifelong quest for virtue and moral self-improvement. Rosen (2024) explains how the Founding Fathers drew on classical Greek and Roman moral philosophers to shape their view that political self-government depends on personal self-government, which means that moral character and virtue were essential to the health and stability of a democratic society. Educational institutions of the period were conceived as venues for fostering civic virtue and character alongside literacy and knowledge acquisition (Noddings, 2005). This aim was frequently realized through curricula that integrated values such as honesty and patriotism, notably through widely used texts such as the Eclectic Readers- commonly known as the McGuffey Readers; named after their editors (Miami University, 2025).

Character in American Education

Throughout the 19th century, textbooks continued to emphasize civic virtues, reflecting a prevailing belief that schools were responsible for shaping both intellect and conscience (McClellan, 1999). Many colleges founded during this era, whether religious or secular, embraced moral training as a core element of their educational mission. The Bible was often employed not only as a mechanism for literacy but also as a vehicle for imparting moral instruction (Lickona, 1993). However, as the United States grew increasingly religiously diverse and denominational conflicts intensified, educators progressively shifted toward secular materials to teach ethics and civic responsibility (Hunter, 2000). The century culminated with John Dewey's progressive philosophy, which advocated for education as active engagement in the moral life of society and the cultivation of democratic character (Dewey, 1916; Dewey, 1944).

In the early 20th century, the promotion of character and ethical development remained integral to public education, with many schools consciously fostering civic virtue and moral responsibility (McClellan, 1999). Yet, by mid-century, moral instruction receded as the emphasis shifted toward standardized academic achievement (Hunter, 2000). The sociocultural upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s precipitated philosophical challenges to traditional moral education, fueled by growing cultural pluralism and skepticism toward established authority (Nucci, 1989). During this period, Lawrence Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental theory of moral reasoning gained prominence, advocating for moral growth through structured analysis of moral dilemmas rather than direct virtue instruction (Kohlberg, 1981). Educational paradigms increasingly favored individual autonomy and personal choice over communal moral norms, a shift that critics contended fostered moral relativism and weakened the school's role in cultivating a shared civic and ethical foundation (Lickona, 1991; Hunter, 2000).

The 1980s witnessed a revival of direct character instruction, largely in response to societal concerns regarding student behavior and perceived declines in youth morality (McClellan, 1999). Educators reintroduced moral education, citizenship curricula, and behavioral reinforcement to support ethical development in schools (Lickona, 1991). This momentum intensified throughout the 1990s, marked by a national resurgence of character education. Thomas Lickona emerged as a leading advocate, promoting a movement centered on universal core values such as respect, responsibility, fairness, and caring (Lickona, 1991, 1993). In 1994, the U.S. Congress authorized the Department of Education's Partnerships in Character Education Program, providing federal funding to bolster school-based initiatives nationwide (U.S. Department of Education [USDE], 2006).

Contemporary Approaches to Character Development

The 21st century has brought considerable innovation to prosocial student development, notably through the rise of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). While character education focuses on whole child moral development, SEL emphasizes competencies such as emotional awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Zins et al., 2004). By integrating academic learning with ethical development, SEL programs are supported by research demonstrating positive outcomes in both student achievement and personal growth (Elias et al., 1997; Shriver & Weissberg, 2005). Furthermore, service learning has gained prominence as a method for embedding moral education within real-world civic engagement. Through community-based projects, students actively practice empathy, collaboration, and responsibility while deepening their academic understanding (Lickona, 1991; Elkind & Sweet, 2004).

Character education has consistently been woven into the fabric of schooling, from Socrates' early teachings on virtue to contemporary emphases on social and emotional learning. At its core, the mission remains unchanged: to facilitate growth not only in knowledge but also in character. In an increasingly complex and fragmented world, character education serves as a vital link between classroom instruction and the development of the ethical, engaged individuals our society requires. It fosters connections between schools and communities and reminds us that true education encompasses far more than grades or test scores; it nurtures the whole child.

Core Components and Frameworks

Effective character education approaches are anchored in the cultivation and reinforcement of fundamental ethical and civic virtues that support individual flourishing and communal well-being (Lickona, 1991; Berkowitz & Bier, 2005). These virtues may include respect, responsibility, honesty, caring, fairness, and citizenship (Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis, 2007). While explicit instruction is important, the most impactful programs embed character development within the broader school culture, policies, and everyday practices (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Benninga et al., 2003). Successful initiatives are intentional, comprehensive, and sustained, engaging all members of the school community in the ongoing work of character formation (Lickona et al., 2007).

Character education is not a monolithic approach but rather can be effectively organized using structured, research-based frameworks. Such frameworks provide schools with guidance on how to develop, implement, and assess character education initiatives that are developmentally appropriate and contextually meaningful (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2017; Kristjánsson, 2015).

Lickona's/ Character.org's Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education

One of the most widely cited and influential frameworks in the United States is Thomas Lickona's Eleven Principles of Effective Character Education (Lickona, Schaps, & Lewis, 2007). This framework offers a blueprint for schools seeking to develop comprehensive and sustainable character education initiatives and serves as the foundation for Character.org's own 11 Principles Framework. The principles emphasize promoting core ethical and performance values as the foundation of good character, defining character to include thinking, feeling, and behavior, and using a comprehensive, intentional, and proactive approach to character development. They encourage creating a caring school community where all members are valued and respected, providing students with opportunities for moral action such as service learning and peer mentoring, offering a meaningful and challenging academic curriculum that respects all learners, fostering students' self-motivation and encouraging them to internalize moral values, engaging school staff as a learning and moral community that models ethical behavior, building shared moral leadership and long-term support among staff, families, and community members, involving families and community members as partners in character education, and evaluating the school's culture, the staff's role as character educators, and the extent to which students demonstrate good character. These principles call for schoolwide integration, ensuring that character education is woven into every aspect of the learning environment, from academic content and extracurricular activities to staff relationships and disciplinary policies. While developed independently from the Canyon Center for Character Education's (CCCE) Framework for Purposeful Cultures of Character, both share the conviction that character must be intentionally embedded across curriculum, relationships, and school culture, supported by adult modeling and reflective assessment (CCCE, 2024).

The Jubilee Centre's Framework

In the United Kingdom, the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues at the University of Birmingham has advanced a complementary yet distinct framework for character education. Their neo-Aristotelian model organizes character into four types of virtues: moral virtues, such as honesty, compassion, and justice, that guide interpersonal conduct and ethical decision-making; performance virtues, like perseverance, resilience, and self-discipline, that support goal-setting, productivity, and achievement; civic virtues, such as service, community involvement, and citizenship, that promote engagement in democratic and communal life; and intellectual virtues, like curiosity, critical thinking, and open-mindedness, that foster a love of learning and informed judgment. At the heart of this model lies practical wisdom, or phronesis, the integrative virtue that enables individuals to discern the right course of action by balancing and applying moral, performance, civic, and intellectual virtues in ways that are contextually appropriate (Kristjánsson, 2015). Without practical wisdom, virtues risk being applied in isolation or misdirected, leading to well-intentioned but misguided actions.

This classification reflects a nuanced and multidimensional conception of character, acknowledging that moral excellence alone is insufficient for comprehensive human flourishing without the complementary development of cognitive, social, and civic capacities (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2017). The Jubilee Centre emphasizes the dual importance of reasoned reflection and experiential learning, contending that students must engage not only in acquiring knowledge about virtues but also in embodying them through authentic lived experiences. For example, a lesson might introduce fairness as a moral virtue, while performance virtues such as grit and self-control are cultivated through sustained effort on collaborative projects. Civic virtues are enacted through participation in community service or democratic classroom practices, and intellectual virtues become salient when students deliberate ethical dilemmas or critically analyze literature imbued with moral themes. Practical wisdom then guides students in weaving these virtues together, ensuring that fairness is exercised with empathy, grit is directed toward just goals, and intellectual inquiry is rooted in moral purpose (Kristjánsson, 2015). The acquisition and practicing of virtues is further explained in the Jubilee Centre's framework through the

concept of character being caught, taught, and sought (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2017). Virtues are first absorbed informally by observing moral role models in everyday life, relationships, literature, and history. This implicit learning helps individuals internalize virtues through authentic examples. Virtues must also be explicitly taught using clear language, discussion, reflection, and structured activities to deepen understanding and moral reasoning. Finally, virtue is developed through active practice and habituation in real-life contexts, such as community service or collaborative projects, where individuals intentionally pursue ethical growth. When placed alongside the CCCE Framework for Purposeful Cultures of Character, a clear alignment emerges. CCCE draws from the same virtue domains, moral, performance, civic, and intellectual, and positions practical wisdom as the integrating force that ensures virtues are lived consistently and contextually. Both frameworks emphasize reflection, community building, and sustained action as essential for fostering human and societal flourishing (CCCE, 2024).

PRIMED

Developed by Marvin W. Berkowitz, Ph.D., the PRIMED framework synthesizes decades of empirical research into six guiding design principles for character education:

Prioritization
Relationships
Intrinsic Motivation
Modeling
Empowerment
Developmental Pedagogy (Berkowitz, 2021).

Rather than prescribing a program, PRIMED identifies the conditions schools must create to embed character into the fabric of educational life. Prioritization emphasizes the centrality of character in a school's mission and culture, while Relationships highlight the deliberate cultivation of caring, respectful connections across the community. Intrinsic Motivation underscores the importance of students internalizing values rather than responding to external rewards, and Modeling reflects the necessity of adults embodying the virtues they seek to cultivate. Empowerment calls for authentic student voice and agency, and Developmental Pedagogy situates teaching within a long-term trajectory that attends to moral, social, and emotional as well as academic growth.

The framework has gained recognition both in scholarship and practice. Berkowitz's *PRIMED for Character Education: Six Design Principles for School Improvement* received the 2023 Outstanding Book Award from the American Educational Research Association's Moral Development and Education SIG (AERA, 2023), and the PRIMED Institute at the University of Missouri–St. Louis provides professional development for educators seeking to implement its principles (UMSL, 2021). In contrast to frameworks such as Lickona's Eleven Principles or the Jubilee Centre's Framework, PRIMED emphasizes creating systemic, schoolwide conditions that support the authentic development of character. Like the JCCV Framework character is caught through modeling (the "M" in PRIMED) and sought character becomes an intrinsic motivation (the "I" in PRIMED). PRIMED reflects an approach that also moves beyond isolated lessons toward a research-informed approach that prioritizes relationships, agency, and developmental purpose as foundations for flourishing schools and communities.

Common Core Components Across Frameworks

Despite differing emphases, the Lickona, Jubilee Centre, and CCCE framework, along with Berkowitz's PRIMED Model, share foundational components that collectively guide effective character education. These components reflect the integration of explicit instruction, experiential practice, reflective dialogue, adult modeling, and community engagement, ensuring that character development is intentional and embedded across the school ecosystem.

Students are taught the meaning, importance, and application of core virtues, supported by virtue literacy and guided by practical wisdom. Instruction includes discussion of moral dilemmas, ethical reasoning, and real-life examples, ensuring students understand not just what virtues are, but how to apply them thoughtfully. Character education is embedded across all subject areas, such as perseverance in mathematics, empathy in literature, and civic responsibility in social studies. The Jubilee Centre highlights the interplay of moral, performance, civic, and intellectual virtues, while PRIMED emphasizes practice in authentic contexts, ensuring that virtues are exercised, reflected upon, and reinforced throughout academic experiences.

Teachers, staff, and community members act as ethical exemplars, demonstrating virtues in daily interactions and decision-making. Modeling occurs consistently across school environments, ensuring students experience a coherent and trustworthy moral ecosystem. Students engage in service learning, restorative practices, peer mentoring, and leadership roles, which allow for experiential learning and the exercise of civic and performance virtues.

Schools cultivate a common vocabulary for discussing virtues, ethical choices, and moral dilemmas, involving students, staff, families, and community members in co-creating this language. Shared terminology strengthens understanding, ensures consistency in reinforcement, and empowers students to articulate and reflect on moral and ethical principles. Character education programs prioritize student ownership of ethical development, enabling learners to set goals, make choices, and evaluate the consequences of their actions. This aligns with PRIMED's emphasis on dialogue and reflection, as well as CCCE's focus on co-creating a vision for human and societal flourishing, and JCCV's "character sought".

Schools measure not only academic progress but also ethical, social, and emotional growth. Reflection is embedded into classroom discussions, service learning projects, and peer interactions. Practical wisdom is cultivated as students learn to balance moral, intellectual, performance, and civic virtues in contextually appropriate ways, ensuring that ethical decision-making is thoughtful, deliberate, and socially responsible.

By integrating these components, educators create a comprehensive, intentional, and inclusive character education ecosystem. Explicit instruction, embedded practice, reflective dialogue, adult modeling, moral action, community engagement, shared language, student agency, and assessment work synergistically to develop ethical, capable, and compassionate individuals. Together, Lickona, the Jubilee Centre, CCCE, and PRIMED provide complementary frameworks that reinforce each other while offering practical guidance for schools seeking to foster character through culture, curriculum, and community.

Toward Integrated and Inclusive Practice

The frameworks advanced by Lickona and the Jubilee Centre, and further expanded by the CCCE, underscore the critical importance of whole-school engagement and the alignment of values across school practices, community norms, and students' lived experiences. Contemporary scholarship increasingly advocates for culturally sustaining character education, which ensures that the virtues promoted are reflective of and responsive to the diverse cultural backgrounds of students and their families. This approach challenges one-dimensional or prescriptive conceptions of good character and instead fosters student-centered, community-anchored practices that develop character through authentic, affirming, and equitable learning experiences.

Character education should not be viewed as an "add-on" for educators, but rather as the foundational framework upon which effective teaching, learning, and school culture rest. It integrates seamlessly with academic instruction, classroom management, and community engagement, providing the conditions and purpose for all educational initiatives. Effective character education is intentional, inclusive, reflective, and firmly grounded in the lived realities of students and educators, enabling schools to nurture ethical, capable, and compassionate individuals who can think critically, act ethically, and contribute meaningfully to the common good.

Evidence of Effectiveness

A growing body of empirical research substantiates the efficacy of character education in enhancing both social-emotional and academic outcomes for students. When implemented with fidelity and embedded within the school culture, character education initiatives contribute to reductions in disciplinary infractions, bullying, and absenteeism, alongside the promotion of positive peer relationships, ethical decision-making, and respect for diversity (Battistich, 2008). Academic performance benefits have also been observed, with students in character-rich educational environments exhibiting greater motivation, engagement, and achievement on standardized assessments (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Durlak et al., 2011; Kristjánsson, 2015).

These positive outcomes are most pronounced when character education is fully integrated into the school curriculum, classroom management approaches, adult role modeling, and community engagement efforts. Research on school climate consistently demonstrates that institutions with robust character education approaches report higher levels of safety, trust, inclusivity, and connectedness, dimensions that are well-established predictors of both mental health and academic achievement (Benninga et al., 2003; Elias, 2009). Character education yielding higher levels in these areas also aligns with the six key principles of trauma-informed care (safety, trust, mutuality and connectedness), therefore further emphasizing the importance of combining these two elements in school cultures.

Character Education: Current Trends and Future Directions

Contemporary character education increasingly reflects the complexities of global and digital contexts. Issues such as digital citizenship, environmental stewardship, and global empathy are now regularly incorporated into curricular frameworks. Moreover, researchers and practitioners are investigating the dynamic interplay between character education and student agency, highlighting the necessity of fostering students' capacities for critical reflection, ethical engagement, and meaningful societal contribution.

As the educational landscape confronts pressing challenges related to equity, inclusion, and trauma-informed practice, character education is being thoughtfully adapted to align with these imperatives. When implemented with careful attention to context, culture, and student voice, character education holds the promise not only of cultivating ethical individuals but also of advancing more just, compassionate, and resilient school communities. Part of such a movement involves the development of social-emotional learning skills as well.

What is SEL?

Social emotional learning (SEL) is a concept focused on helping children build essential capacities they will need to navigate the world successfully (Greenberg, 2023). It is defined as the process through which individuals learn and apply knowledge, skills, attitudes in areas such as emotion management, empathy, relationships, decision making, and identity (CASEL, 2025a). These skills help us to understand ourselves, connect with others, achieve goals and support the communities in which we live (CASEL, 2025a). SEL focuses on the whole child and supports children in building capacities to build healthy relationships; treat others with respect, dignity and empathy; engage in effective social problem solving; and engage with families, communities and societies in contributing and adaptive ways (Greenberg, 2023). Fostering these skills requires developmental educational approaches that target social and emotional competencies, cognitive skills, social awareness and self-management (Greenberg, 2023). The aim of SEL is to support communities, families and caregivers, schools and classrooms to work together to implement activities and opportunities to develop core competencies of social and emotional learning (CASEL, 2025b). Using instruction, schoolwide practices, building partnership with families and aligning with curriculum and learning policy in education, SEL utilizes collaborative framework to achieve a variety of objectives around SEL and the individual children it impacts (CASEL, 2025b).

Core Competencies

There are five core competencies in social emotional learning, as developed by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) and researched for effectiveness. They are broad and interrelated areas of competence that can be taught across developmental stages and in a variety of cultural and educational contexts (CASEL, 2025b). These five competencies include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2025b; Lawson et al., 2019).

Self-awareness

Self-awareness is the ability of an individual to understand their own emotions, personal goals, individual values, thoughts and behavior across contexts (Greenberg, 2023; CASEL, 2025b). This can include being able to reflect and assess your own strengths, limitations and biases in order to utilize growth-mindset to develop your own personal and collective goals (Greenberg, 2023). It means having a sense of confidence and purpose that is grounded in awareness of self (CASEL, 2025b) and an ability to "recognize how your thoughts, feelings, values, and actions are connected to one another and one's personal and social identity" (Greenberg, 2023, p. 4).

Self-management

Self-management is the ability to manage things such as emotions, stress, and motivation in order to delay gratification, manage impulses, accomplish goals and manage emotions, thoughts and behaviors in different contexts (CASEL, 2025b). It includes utilizing stress management strategies, planning and organizational skills, and personal agency in effective ways (CASEL, 2025b).

Responsible Decision Making

Responsible decision making is the ability to make decisions and choices about personal behavior and in social interactions that are caring, constructive, and ethical (CASEL, 2025b). It can include the capacity to consider ethical standards, safety concerns, diversity and includes the ability to evaluate benefits and consequences of choices and actions on self, others, and a larger community (CASEL, 2025b). Capacities in this realm can include curiosity, open mindedness, analysis of information, problem solving, conflict negotiation, critical thinking, reflection and evaluations (CASEL, 2025b; Greenberg, 2023).

Relationship Skills

Relationship skills include the ability to establish, maintain and navigate healthy relationships, including in settings with diverse individuals or groups (CASEL, 2025b). Capacities within this realm include clear communication, active listening, cooperation, collaboration with others, leadership skills and cultural competency (CASEL, 2025b).

Social Awareness

Having the ability to understand the perspectives of others as well as empathize with the experience of others is the hallmark of social awareness. This includes being able to work with those from diverse backgrounds or cultures and feel compassion, connection and understanding to historical and social norms in those backgrounds and cultures (CASEL, 2025b). Competencies in social awareness include perspective taking, empathy for others, understanding and expressing gratitude, responding to situational demands, and identifying social norms (CASEL, 2025b).

Benefits of SEL

Research shows a variety of benefits stemming from social emotional learning initiatives, including academic learning, social/emotional growth, positive learning environments, and improved classroom engagement. For example, SEL programs have shown measurable growth in social and emotional skills, academic growth and improved behavioral management (Dominguez& LaGue, 2013) as well as a lowering of student stress (Payton et al., 2000). Students who participated in SEL programs showed more positive attitudes toward self and others, gains in positive social behaviors, and a decrease in conduct problems and emotional distress (Dominguez & LaGue, 2013). Merrin & Low (2023) found that SEL programs showed significant effects for hyperactivity, conduct problems, and emotional symptoms. Improvements in well-being, emotional regulation, cognitive function and academic performance can also be found when using SEL approaches in the classroom (Galinha et al., 2025). SEL can also support a positive classroom environment, such as helping to address forms of inequality (CASSEL, 2025a, para 2), boosting student school engagement (Zins et al, 2004) and increased academic performance (Greenberg, 2023).

Implementation Recommendations

The implementation of SEL programs is an indicator of the success of those programs. By understanding how to effectively implement SEL programs in educational settings, with families and caregivers and in the larger community, outcomes can be increased and benefits more effectively achieved. High quality SEL instruction includes four elements, including a coordinated set of sequence approaches, the inclusion of active forms of learning, the implementation of curriculum that is focused on SEL competencies and the explicit defining and targeting of skills (CASEL, 2025b).

Classrooms

Schools play an important role in the implementation and promotion of SEL programs and competencies (Lawson et all, 2019). By implementing programs in classroom settings, social and emotional competence can be enhanced (CASEL, 2025b). Strategies include providing explicit instruction around emotional skills and attitudes; utilizing cooperative learning and project-based approaches; integrating SEL into academic curriculum, and practicing skills in the classroom (CASEL, 2025b). Ensuring that the environments are nurturing and safe as well as characterized by positive and caring relationships is the most effective way in which to introduce SEL components. Instruction should be age-appropriate and culturally responsive, and must be adapted to the individual needs of students (CASEL, 2025b).

Schools

In addition to directly teaching SEL skills in the classroom, schoolwide planning should integrate SEL within the community. This helps to contribute and expect a school, climate of respect, support, and engagement. (CASEL 2025b). Being able to include SEL practices in all contexts, including classrooms, the cafeteria, on the playground, etc. can really help to build a strong school culture that builds and integrates SEL competencies into the day to day experience of students (CASEL, 2025b). By coordinating, collaborating, and building SEL practices and programs into the overall school environment, schools promote positive social, emotional, and academic outcomes for all students and adults within the school community (CASEL, 2025b).

Families and Caregivers

The integration of SEL throughout the classroom and school communities should also be coordinated with ongoing collaboration with families and community organizations (CASEL, 2025b). By building partnerships between schools and families, SEL competencies can be reinforced and increase overall social and emotional development. The insights of families are critical to informing SEL approaches most effective for the child. It is also shown that when SEL programs extend into the home and families partner with the SEL initiatives, SEL programming is more effective (CASEL, 2025b).

Communities

Finally, partnering with the community can provide rich settings for learning and development, as well as promote understanding of community needs and possible connections for supporting SEL initiatives. Community programs can help provide practice that is relevant to the SEL learning occurring in schools and can help SEL skills be personally relevant to individual children. By aligning efforts in initiatives around SEL with the community, students have a chance to experience and practice SEL skills and attitudes both in and out of school settings (CASEL, 2025b).

Conclusion

Social emotional learning (SEL) programs implemented collaboratively in classrooms, schools, and communities help students to build skills that are imperative for students to grow and navigate the world successfully (Greenberg, 2023). The knowledge, skills and attitudes in SEL competencies help to support the promotion of healthy relationships, empathy, social problem solving and community engagement, which may also help prepare individuals for hardship and trauma. SEL skills promote the increase of character and identity in students while also providing promotion of resilience and regulation skills supportive of a trauma-informed environment. The connections between SEL, character education and trauma-informed approaches are important to understand as each framework can complement, coordinate and support overall development in the classroom.

Integration with Whole-Child Frameworks

Character education aligns closely with other frameworks that emphasize whole-child development, most notably Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) (Elias, 2009; Durlak et al., 2011). Although these frameworks have distinct historical and conceptual origins (character education often rooted in moral philosophy and civic responsibility, and SEL emerging from developmental psychology and emotional competence) they share considerable overlap in both their objectives and implementation strategies (Lickona, 1991; CASEL, 2020; Kristjánsson, 2015).

The Story of Victory Schools

At VCA, SEL and character education aren't add-ons — they are woven into the DNA of our model. And we didn't adopt them because they were trendy; we adopted them because they were essential.
Character education is SEL in action. It's the daily practice of respect, responsibility, empathy, and integrity. It's learning how to greet someone, how to disagree respectfully, how to apologize, how to collaborate, and how to persist when things get tough. These skills are not optional. They are what employers, colleges, and communities value most — and what our students deserve.

SEL primarily focuses on five core competencies identified by CASEL: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (CASEL, 2020). These competencies are foundational for fostering emotional intelligence and healthy interpersonal relationships. Character education serves as the overarching "tree," encompassing the moral development, positive relationships, and ethical decision-making that define whole-child education. Within this framework, social and emotional learning (SEL) functions as one essential branch, promoting the specific skills, such as self-awareness, empathy, and responsible decision-making, that help students live out the virtues at the heart of character education (Lickona et al., 2007; Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2017; Elias, 2009; Kristjánsson, 2015). In this view, virtues such as integrity, respect, fairness, and compassion remain the central focus, while SEL provides the practical skill set to express these virtues in thought, word, and action.

Recognizing this synergy, numerous schools and districts have adopted integrated models that combine character education and SEL into unified approaches (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005; Durlak et al., 2011). These integrative models leverage the strengths of both traditions to cultivate learning environments that support academic rigor, emotional resilience, ethical citizenship, and personal growth. Initiatives such as the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model (ASCD & CDC, 2014) and "Character + SEL = Successful Students" partnerships (Character.

org, 2020) encourage educational institutions to transcend fragmented programming in favor of cohesive, systemic strategies that promote holistic development.

Trauma-informed approaches, while primarily focused on neurobiological factors and the establishment of emotional safety, can be significantly enhanced through the integration of character education and SEL programming. All of these frameworks promote emotional development, social problem-solving skills, regulation strategies, and effective management of emotional responses. Consequently, the combined implementation of these approaches maximizes developmental gains and fosters positive outcomes for students regardless of their backgrounds or experiences.

Incorporating character education alongside trauma-informed practices and culturally responsive pedagogy, equips schools to more effectively address the multifaceted needs of diverse learners (Elias, 2009; Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2017). Such integrative frameworks ensure that character development transcends the mere transmission of values, empowering students with the skills, supportive relationships, and nurturing environments necessary to enact those values in meaningful and impactful ways.

While Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) emphasizes the development of competencies and skills, character education prioritizes the internalization of virtues and values. Together, these frameworks support the holistic development of students by guiding both what to do (virtues) and how to do it (skills).

Trauma-Informed Strategy	SEL Competency (CASEL)	Description	Corresponding Character Virtues	Example in Practice
Awareness of triggers and ability to select self-soothing strategies	Self-Awareness	Recognizing one's emotions, values, strengths, and limitations	Honesty, Humility, Self-Respect	Student reflects on a journal prompt about personal growth or moral choices
Prioritization of building and supporting self-regulation skills	Self-Management	Regulating emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations	Self-Control, Perseverance, Responsibility	Student sets a goal to improve time management or control impulsive behavior
The promotion of skills to build safe relationships, empathy and self regulation	Social Awareness	Empathizing with others, including those from diverse backgrounds	Compassion, Respect, Fairness	Student practices active listening during a class discussion about different cultures
Emphasis on development of coping strategies to support relationship development	Relationship Skills	Establishing and maintaining healthy relationships and resolving conflict	Kindness, Cooperation, Loyalty, Forgiveness	Student engages in conflict resolution or peer mediation during a group project
Promotion of coping and regulation skills to support adaptive decision making	Responsible Decision-Making	Making ethical, constructive choices about personal and social behavior	Integrity, Courage, Justice, Wisdom	Student chooses to report cheating and explains the moral reasoning behind their choice

Trauma, SEL, and character education are deeply interconnected, with SEL and character education often functioning as integral components of trauma-informed practices within educational settings (Elias, 2009; Osher et al., 2016). Trauma can profoundly disrupt a child's developmental trajectory by impairing their capacity to form healthy relationships, regulate emotions, and engage meaningfully in academic endeavors (Brunzell, Waters, & Stokes, 2016). Students who have experienced trauma frequently exhibit challenges with emotional regulation, attention, behavior, attendance, and interpersonal trust- factors critical to both social-emotional growth and academic success (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). Moreover, the unpredictable effects of trauma may undermine a student's sense of safety and stability, thereby limiting access to the higher-order cognitive processes essential for learning.
In response to these challenges, character education provides a foundational framework centered on cultivating core virtues such as integrity, respect, responsibility, and perseverance. By fostering these virtues, character education aims to develop students' moral compass and commitment to ethical behavior, equipping them to navigate adversity with strength and purpose (Lickona et al., 2007; Jubilee Centre, 2017). While Social Emotional Learning (SEL) offers complementary skills, such as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, that help students regulate emotions and engage constructively with others (CASEL, 2020), it is character education that anchors these competencies within a broader context of moral development and civic responsibility. This focus is particularly crucial for students impacted by trauma, as character education not only fosters resilience and self-regulation but also cultivates a deep sense of personal agency and ethical accountability. Trauma-informed approaches to character and social-emotional growth emphasize creating emotionally safe environments, integrating co-regulation strategies, and honoring student voice and autonomy (Brunzell et al., 2016; Osher et al., 2016).

Character education emphasizes the cultivation of moral and civic virtues such as empathy, respect, integrity, and responsibility (Lickona, 1991; Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2017). These virtues underpin inclusive, respectful, and caring school climates, conditions essential for the well-being of students coping with trauma (Benninga et al., 2003). Character education further encourages the development of ethical reasoning and prosocial behaviors, which can assist students in navigating the complex emotional and social challenges often exacerbated by traumatic experiences. Within trauma-informed environments, character education fosters a sense of belonging and moral agency by reinforcing values that guide compassionate and principled behavior (Kristjánsson, 2015).

The integration of SEL and character education within trauma-informed frameworks embodies a comprehensive approach to student well-being. Rather than functioning in isolation, these models intersect to establish supportive educational environments where students feel emotionally safe, valued, and empowered (Elias, 2009; Osher et al., 2016). For example, a teacher might employ SEL strategies to assist students in identifying and managing overwhelming emotions while simultaneously modeling virtues such as patience and kindness that exemplify strong character. Over time, this deliberate integration of SEL and character education fosters both healing and growth, enabling students not only to recover from trauma but also to flourish academically and personally.

VS Case Study - Bullying:

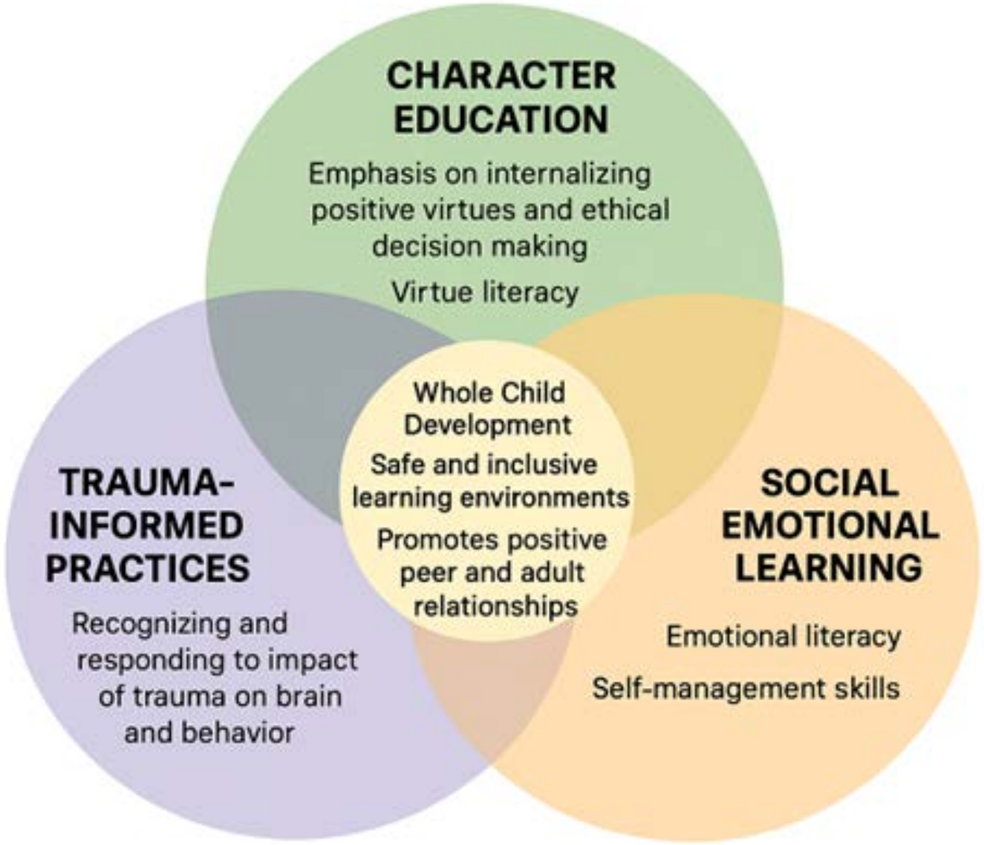
In the Spring of 2022, as a Principal, we had a 4th grade student that had been suspended multiple times throughout the school year for bullying another student in their class. This particular student was a female and physically bigger than her peers. During a debrief with her teacher, she mentioned that during a character lesson around having low self esteem, the student who had been doing the bullying looked significantly impacted by the activity which involved watching a video of a bully in a similar grade level having low self esteem. The student was very emotional and sought out the teacher at lunch to share about what she was going through, and the teacher figured out that the student had low self esteem and the bullying had made her feel powerful and in control of their own feelings of inadequacy. She referenced her weight and physical differences from the students, and she felt the girl she was bullying was smart, pretty, and she wanted that for herself. The teacher suggested we lean into the character pillar of the month that was being referenced in the classroom activity, compassion. Compassion means to care for and empathize for others who have gone through suffering, misfortune and more. With this student we provided counseling and coaching around the compassion that they should have for themselves, and for others that they impact. We talked about her strengths and practiced journaling once a week supporting this student self-reflecting on compassion for themselves and others. Realizing that she was suffering and causing suffering to others, did not sit well with this student, and she ended up doing a whole 360 turn around fixing and mending that relationship with her classmate, and closed out the school year without getting suspended.

VS Case Study - Community Violence:

Several of our high school boys were actively involved in local gangs, pressured daily by peers to prove toughness through fighting or crime. Through mentoring, assemblies, and the pillars of Courage and Integrity, we offered them a new team: Victory's athletics program. Coaches and male role models showed them that real strength comes from self-control and discipline. Over time, these students began trading gang colors for school jerseys. One senior, once identified by police as a "likely repeat offender," graduated with a diploma and a plan for college athletics.

VS Case Study - Sexual Abuse:

An eleventh-grade girl at Victory Schools faced significant trauma after experiencing sexual abuse, which initially left her disconnected from peers and academics. Victory teachers, along with community counseling partners, surrounded her with support and stability. The pillars of courage and perseverance were at the center of her growth journey—courage in speaking openly about her struggles, and perseverance in continuing to pursue her academic goals despite the weight of trauma. Counseling services helped her process emotions, while teachers encouraged her to lead with strength and determination. Over time, she reclaimed her voice, took on leadership opportunities, and re-engaged with her school community. Today, she is thriving in her classroom and serves as an example of how courage and perseverance, paired with strong support systems, can empower students to rise above their challenges.



The Story of Victory Schools

Many of our students carry Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Nationally, about 43% of children have experienced at least one ACE. In Maryvale, that percentage is likely double, if not more. Trauma isn't the exception in our schools; it's the reality.

This is why character education and trauma-informed practice are inseparable in our model. Trauma-informed practice provides the how: safety, predictability, and strong relationships. SEL and character education provide the what: the skills, behaviors, and strategies students need to thrive. Together, they create a school climate where students learn to regulate before they read, and calm before they compute.

At VCA, we train staff in restorative responses and de-escalation strategies, emphasizing repair and re-entry over punishment. We model coping strategies out loud. We greet students at the door, call them by name, and ensure that every adult on campus is a skills coach, not just a supervisor. This isn't just "nice to have." It's what allows our students — many carrying multiple layers of trauma — to feel safe, connected, and ready to learn.

Individual Knowledge and Learning

Knowing Ourselves First: Trauma Awareness and Character Formation in Education

Every teacher and administrator enters education with a unique set of experiences that shape how they view the world, respond to challenges, and connect with students and colleagues. For many, the path into education is paved with a deep desire to make a difference, and to build up the next generation.
However, for some individuals, embedded in that path are unhealed experiences (i.e., personal traumas, painful memories, or a limited life experience) that can unconsciously influence how one shows up in the classroom, how they lead, or how you interpret student behavior. At the same time, character education has taken center stage in our schools. Educators aim to instill virtues like empathy, respect, perseverance, and responsibility in our students. However, these values cannot be effectively taught unless they are first modeled by adults in the building. To authentically teach character, educators and leaders need to embody it, and this begins with a courageous look inward.

This chapter invites educators and leaders to reflect on their own trauma histories and character formation. Greater self-awareness can lead to more intentional, empathetic, and morally grounded leadership. Through this lens, character education becomes not just a curriculum, but a way of being or a foundation for growth, integrity, and healing.

VS Case Study - Community Violence:

A kindergarten student at Victory Schools was deeply affected after witnessing a violent fight between adults outside her apartment complex. The experience left her anxious, easily startled by loud voices, and uncertain about how to handle conflict with classmates. Victory teachers introduced the character pillar of integrity, guiding her to understand that doing what is right—even when others around her are not—builds trust and safety. Through storytelling, role-play, and consistent teacher modeling, she practiced using her words honestly, reporting unsafe behavior, and choosing calm actions instead of reacting in fear. Integrity gave her a framework to separate her own behavior from the chaos she had seen. Over time, the student became more confident in classroom interactions and began to model honesty and fairness for peers. By the end of the year, she had developed a sense of security in knowing that her integrity could guide her through difficult moments, even when the world around her felt unpredictable.

Understanding Personal Trauma

Understanding personal trauma can significantly enhance how teachers and school leaders interact with students. Trauma-informed practices in education help educators comprehend how childhood trauma affects learning and development (Stokes, 2022).

Professional development on trauma-informed care enables teachers to view students as children first and learners second, fostering empathy and compassion (Anderson et al., 2021).
This approach can lead to improved outcomes in student well-being and readiness to learn when implemented as a whole-school strategy (Stokes, 2022). School leaders play a crucial role in implementing trauma-informed practices, requiring a systems-aware perspective to address complex factors affecting school communities (Greig et al., 2021). Educators need to understand trauma's definition, identification, and impact on student behavior, as up to 68% of students have experienced some form of trauma (Bland & Gershwin, 2023). By developing a trauma-informed lens, educators can better support students' learning and emotional needs.

Personal Stories:

The beginning of my trauma journey started with a job opening that I applied for in 2010.

The position was for a Community Education Specialist, working with incarcerated youth in our local county juvenile detention. As this population is very vulnerable, one of the final requirements was to take and pass a lie detector test.
I reported that morning to a private investigator's office, where I was greeted by a very stern man who explained the process. I was going to be interviewed by the investigator, and asked a series of 600 - 700 questions. These questions were meant to be intrusive, and delved into everything from drug use to interpersonal violence. He sat across a desk from me and asked me each question, recording my answers on a piece of paper. Once those were done, we moved to the actual physical part of the test.

The lie detector machine is basically a chair, which contains sensors that read every part of your body that touches it. The machine detects heart rate, body temperature, blood pressure, breathing, motion, and skin conductivity (basically sweat). The chair is positioned next to the read-out machine, so as you are answering you can watch the machine respond.

Once I was attached to the chair, the investigator asked me a few more questions.

Is your name ****? Yes. Flat line.
Did you answer all 600+ questions truthfully? Yes. Flat line.
Did you lie on any of the 600+ questions? No. Flat line.
Have you ever intentionally injured a minor? No. Flat line.

Last question:
Have you ever engaged in sexual contact with a minor child? No. The needle bounced up, creating a tall spiked line like a mountain.
One more time. Have you ever engaged in sexual contact with a minor child? No. Again, the needle bounced up.

At this point the investigator turned off the machine, and said he needed to ask me one more question, off the record.
Are you a survivor of childhood sexual abuse?
I responded yes to that last question, I am a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, but what in the world does that have to do with anything?

The investigator went on to tell me that in his 40 years of administering lie detector tests, he'd found a pattern. Women who have been victimized during childhood display a significant physiological response to the words 'child' and 'sex' in the same sentence. Our bodies respond as though we are in fight or flight.

Keep in mind that I was 40 years old. My trauma occurred more than 30 years before that day, and I had been through years of therapy. My trauma was a single incident with a stranger, and I was believed and removed from the situation immediately. At the time of this lie detector test, I was married, had an advanced college degree, a nice house, and was about to get a very high paying job that I was going to love. My trauma was nowhere near my thinking brain, but it was still there, causing my body to react in a way I couldn't even detect.

This experience was my first step in changing how I look at behavior in my classroom. If my trauma could impact me to the degree that I almost failed a lie detector test - imagine what some of our children are dealing with physically, emotionally, and neurologically? The ones that are still living with their abusers. The ones that aren't believed. The ones that have no safe space.

-Margaret Frey

What is Trauma?

Trauma is increasingly recognized as a critical factor influencing educational outcomes, not only for students but also for educators and school leaders. Broadly defined, trauma encompasses experiences that overwhelm an individual's capacity to cope and result in lasting adverse effects on functioning and well-being (Chafouleas et al., 2021). These experiences may be acute (e.g., a natural disaster), chronic (e.g., ongoing neglect), or complex (e.g., early relational trauma). Trauma is not solely defined by the nature of the event, but by the individual's response to it.

In the context of educational leadership, where all staff within a school are 'leaders', understanding trauma must begin with the self. School leaders are subject to the same neurobiological and psychological impacts of trauma as the students and staff they support. These personal experiences, whether fully processed or unresolved, may influence one's leadership style, relational dynamics, and decision-making. A trauma-informed approach at the leadership level therefore requires both systematic awareness and individual reflection.

How Trauma Shapes Perception and Behavior

The neurobiology of trauma reveals that early and repeated stress can have significant developmental implications. Perry et al. (1995) describes how persistent activation of stress-response systems during childhood, such as those triggered by abuse, neglect, or exposure to violence, can lead to "use dependent" neural development. In this process, neural pathways associated with fear and survival become reinforced, potentially resulting in long-term difficulties with emotional regulation, relational engagement, and executive functioning.

This concept is particularly relevant in school leadership and teaching. Adults who experienced adverse conditions in their own development may unconsciously carry reactive patterns into their professional roles. For example, a leader or educator with unresolved relational trauma may struggle with trust, find it difficult to delegate responsibility, or respond to conflict with heightened emotional reactivity. These behaviors are not inherently signs of weakness or failure; rather, they represent adaptive responses developed in response to past environments.

In addition to individual-level impacts, trauma affects how educators perceive and cultivate belonging in school settings. Allen et al. (2018), in a comprehensive meta-analysis of factors influencing school belonging, emphasize the role of emotional stability and adult support in promoting a sense of connection among students. When educators and leaders have not attended to their own trauma histories, their ability to foster a culture of belonging may be inadvertently compromised. They may misinterpret student behavior, inconsistently apply discipline policies, or struggle to create relational safety within staff teams.

Buxton (2018) similarly argues that behavior often labeled as "defiant" or "noncompliant" in students, particularly those identified with Emotional Disorders, can be better understood through a trauma-informed lens. This perspective applies equally to adults in schools. Leaders under chronic stress may display avoidance, rigidity, or hyper-control not as deliberate choices, but as instinctive, protective strategies rooted in earlier life experiences. Understanding these dynamics allows school leaders to engage more critically and compassionately with their own behaviors and those of others. It also equips them to build cultures where emotional safety is prioritized, and where policies and practices reflect the complexity of human development.

Recognizing Trauma in Yourself

Although educators are not expected to diagnose themselves, it is critical that they develop a foundational awareness of how unresolved trauma may manifest in their professional lives. Unresolved trauma in adults working in school systems can have significant implications for school climate, instructional effectiveness, and staff cohesion. Signs of unresolved trauma in educators may include:

Persistent emotional exhaustion or burnout, even with rest or support:

Southall's (2023) study with teachers supporting students with complex trauma revealed both personal and professional challenges stemming from empathetic connection, including emotional fatigue and reduced resilience. In leaders, this may present as persistent burnout, difficulty recovering after a crisis, or attrition.

Patterns of hypervigilance or emotional overreaction to stressors:

Adaptive trauma responses sometimes elevate a leader's need for certainty and predictability. This may manifest as micromanagement, avoidance of delegation, or inflexible adherence to protocol under stress. Difficulty maintaining professional boundaries or navigating conflict: trauma-responsive leaders and staff may blur professional lines. This can be seen as over-identifying with students or teachers through rescuing behaviors, or emotionally distancing to avoid perceived vulnerability.

Emotional reactivity:

Stokes (2023) found that some teachers experienced relational strain when student behaviors activated unresolved personal trauma. These "relational ruptures" were often marked by mis-attunement or conflict. School leaders may experience similar dynamics, such as heightened emotional sensitivity, difficulty receiving feedback, or overreacting to relatively minor challenges. These patterns suggest that unprocessed trauma can distort perception and hinder healthy interpersonal interactions within school communities.

Disconnection from colleagues or avoidance of collaboration:

Southall (2023) emphasizes that effective trauma-informed responses depend heavily on critical reflection. When leaders operate in a trauma state, they may default to reaction rather than pausing to question assumptions and adapt.

These are not signs of inadequacy. Rather, they signal that past traumas continue to shape reactions often out of conscious awareness. Coban and Tan (2020) further support the link between childhood trauma and adult symptomatology. Research stresses the importance of integrating trauma-informed practices, not only at the student level, but to also address adult well-being, especially those in positions of influence (Chafouleas et al., 2021; Stokes, 2022).

Self-awareness is critical for educators, serving not only personal well-being but also for effective implementation of trauma-informed practices (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2016). The ability to recognize and regulate emotional responses is directly associated with a teacher being better equipped to create safe and supportive classroom environments (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). This self-knowledge is especially valuable when working with students who may be experiencing their own emotional challenges. When educators can reflect on their personal histories, they are able to more effectively support student healing and resilience, while maintaining a classroom climate defined by emotional safety and mutual respect (Meiklejohn et al., 2012)

The experiences educators carry, particularly traumatic ones, often influence how they respond emotionally, manage classrooms, and develop their teaching style. For example, a teacher who has faced trauma might be more sensitive to specific student behaviors or classroom situations that feel reminiscent of their own past challenges. A history of childhood abuse might make an educator more reactive when a student seems disrespectful or defiant, unintentionally stirring up unresolved emotions (Van Dernoot Lipsky & Burk, 2009). These reactions can sometimes result in responses that are out of proportion or in misunderstandings of student intent. Recognizing the connection between past trauma and present reactions allows educators to respond to students with empathy and maintain thoughtful self-regulation.

An educator's individual history can also shape how they approach boundaries with students. For example, one educator may feel a strong urge to help students who appear emotionally distressed if their own background includes neglect or a lack of support. Another might react more strongly to a student's emotional outbursts. Educators can develop healthier and more professional boundaries by reflecting on how personal experiences inform their interactions with students. This reflection helps ensure that their support for students remains balanced and appropriate, allowing them to be compassionate while maintaining the necessary professional distance (Souers & Hall, 2016). Journaling and mindfulness activities are great ways to begin a consistent, intentional reflective practice.

Addressing one's trauma history is an essential part of personal and professional growth. When educators understand and process their past trauma, they can work towards healing and become more emotionally resilient. This healing process is crucial not only for the educator's well-being but also for their ability to remain present, calm, and compassionate in their interactions with students. Unresolved trauma can affect an educator's emotional stability, energy levels, and patience, all of which impact their effectiveness in the classroom.

Educators who are aware of their own trauma history are also better equipped to create trauma-informed classrooms that support healing. These educators can model emotional regulation, resilience, and empathy, which helps foster a supportive classroom environment. Students who have experienced their own trauma need adults who understand the impact of emotional pain, who can provide stability and safety. Teachers who acknowledge their own histories of trauma are more likely to recognize the signs of trauma in their students and respond in compassionate, effective ways.

Self-care is an essential component of trauma awareness for educators. Self-aware educators are better able to recognize when they are approaching emotional burnout or experiencing secondary trauma. Through self-care practices such as mindfulness, therapy, or regular physical activity, educators can maintain their emotional health and avoid the negative effects of stress. Addressing one's trauma history is a form of self-care that ensures teachers can be fully present for their students without carrying unresolved emotional burdens.

Self-awareness for educators, particularly in understanding their trauma history, is critically important. Personal trauma shapes teaching styles, emotional responses, and student relationships, which makes it essential for educators to process their trauma to create safe, supportive, and compassionate classrooms. Educators should prioritize self-awareness and actively work to address their own trauma histories. By doing so, they will not only enhance their professional growth but also be better equipped to foster healing and growth in their students. Educators must commit to self-care, seek professional development, and engage in reflective practices to ensure they can provide the best possible support to their students.

Reflective Considerations

Engaging in trauma-informed leadership and teaching begins with reflective practice. Leaders must be willing to examine how their own developmental histories influence their behaviors, assumptions, and relational patterns. Immordino et al. (2019) argues that brain development is inherently social and emotional, reinforcing the importance of adults understanding their own neurobiological and emotional frameworks in order to support others effectively.

Reflective Activity 1: Personal Timeline of Influential Experiences

In this activity, school leaders are encouraged to develop a personal timeline that identifies formative life experience, both positive and challenging. This can also include early educational encounters, key relationships, and moments of adversity or transformation.

Directions:

1. Draw a horizontal timeline from early childhood to your current professional role.
2. Identify and label key formative experiences on that timeline.

Reflective questions:

- What messages did I internalize about trust, authority, failure or success?
- How do these early experiences shape my leadership decisions today?
- In what ways might I be re-enacting unresolved patterns in my current role?

Character Education Begins with the Educator

Effective leadership in trauma-informed schools requires more than structural change or policy implementation. This requires an educator's conscious embodiment of character. As the moral and emotional tone-setters of a school, teachers and teacher-leaders are uniquely positioned to influence the behaviors, beliefs, and resilience of those they serve. Research in trauma-informed practice increasingly emphasizes the role of educators as relational and values-driven, underscoring the necessity of character-based actions in cultivating safe, inclusive, and supportive school environments (Stokes, 2022; Stokes & Brunzell, 2020).

Rather than relying solely on initiatives, leaders and educators must model the very traits they seek to promote in students and staff. These traits include compassion, fairness, humility, courage, and integrity. These are not abstract ideals, but lived commitments that are revealed through daily decision-making, communication, and interaction. When leadership character is visible and authentic, it fosters trust, strengthens professional relationships, and ultimately transforms the school culture into one that supports both learning and healing.

Demonstrating Character Through Leadership

Character-informed leadership is more than a philosophical stance; it is an enacted practice that deeply influences school culture and educator well-being. Educators and leaders who intentionally model character, through humility, integrity, courage, and empathy, set a standard for behavior and relational trust within the school community. According to Peterson (2020), character traits are not only teachable, but they are also observable and contagious. When school leaders exemplify character, they invite staff and students into a shared moral vision grounded in lived experience.

Maurer et al. (2023), emphasize that self-reflective leadership is foundational to sustained personal and professional growth. In their Personal Growth Process Model, they propose that transformation begins with a deep awareness of personal values and beliefs. When educators and leaders engage in self-reflection, they can identify how their experiences inform their decisions, and they are better positioned to align their actions with their stated values. This alignment matters. Educators and leaders who model transparency and integrity foster climates of psychological safety, which in turn support staff resilience and relational trust (Stokes and Brunzell, 2020). For example, when a school leader or educator openly acknowledges a mistake and takes responsibility, it normalizes vulnerability and models accountability. These are not just emotional displays, they are character-based actions that shape the school's emotional and moral climate.

VS Case Study - Divorced Families:

A third-grade student at Victory Schools struggled to adjust after her parents' divorce, which deeply impacted her emotions and behavior on campus. She often displayed frustration in class, had difficulty waiting her turn, and would withdraw from peers when conflicts arose. Victory teachers recognized these signs and introduced her to the school's character education program, focusing on the pillars of patience and tolerance. Through guided activities, reflection circles, and consistent encouragement, she learned strategies to pause before reacting and to better understand the perspectives of her classmates. With modeling from her teachers and support from her peers, the student began to practice patience during group work and tolerance when disagreements occurred. Small successes were celebrated, reinforcing her growth and confidence. Over time, her behavior improved significantly, and she became more engaged in learning and building friendships. By the end of the school year, the student showed resilience and maturity, using patience and tolerance as tools to navigate both her personal challenges and her interactions on campus

Stokes (2022) frames this as "leading through being" which is a process in which the character of the leader becomes a daily instrument for systemic transformation. Leaders influence not just what is done, but how it is done. And the tone they set becomes embedded in the routines, rituals, and relationships of the school. This relational model of leadership is essential to trauma-informed practice, where students and educators alike benefit from emotionally attuned and values-driven interactions.

Strategies for Educators to Cultivate Self-Awareness and Address Trauma History:

Reflection and Journaling
Educators can develop self-awareness through reflective practices, such as journaling. Writing about their emotional responses to classroom situations, personal triggers, and challenges can help them process their emotions and gain insight into how their past trauma influences their current behavior. Regular reflection allows teachers to recognize patterns and make adjustments to their teaching practices.

Professional Development and Trauma Training
Ongoing professional development is essential for educators to deepen their understanding of trauma-informed practices. This may include workshops or training programs that focus on emotional intelligence, self-awareness, mindfulness techniques, and trauma-informed teaching strategies. By engaging in continuous learning, educators can gain practical tools for managing their emotional responses and better supporting their students.

Therapy or Counseling
Seeking therapy or counseling is one of the most effective ways for educators to process their trauma history. Having a safe space to explore personal emotions with a trained professional is vital for healing and emotional growth. Educators who address their trauma in therapy are more likely to remain emotionally balanced and to model healthy coping mechanisms for their students.

Peer support and collaboration
Educators can create peer support networks where they share their experiences, discuss challenges, and provide emotional support to one another. These networks help reduce feelings of isolation and burnout and offer opportunities for collaborative problem-solving. Peer support groups can also serve as a space for teachers to discuss their personal growth and how it impacts their professional development.

Positive Impact of Strong Self-Awareness on Student Relationships and Learning

Modeling Emotional Intelligence and Self-Regulation
Educators who are self-aware and emotionally regulated set a positive example for their students. Students learn by observing their teachers' responses to stress, conflict, and emotional challenges. Educators who model emotional intelligence help students develop their own emotional skills, which are essential for success in both academics and life.

Enhancing student-teacher relationships
Teachers who understand their own trauma history can better connect with their students. Self-aware educators approach students with empathy, understanding that challenging behaviors often stem from deeper emotional struggles. When educators respond thoughtfully and with compassion, they build stronger relationships with students, which fosters trust and creates a safe space for learning.

Fostering a safe and supportive classroom environment
Educators who address their trauma history can create environments where students feel emotionally safe and supported. A classroom where teachers are emotionally present and attuned to students' needs is essential for fostering academic success, personal growth, and resilience. Students thrive in environments where they feel understood and valued by the adults around them.

Impact on Staff and Students
The actions of educators and leaders have a measurable and observable impact on staff morale, student engagement, and school climate. As Turner et al. (2024) explain, teachers take cues from their leaders about what is valued, what is tolerated, and what is expected. When school leaders consistently embody respect, fairness, and compassion, these traits are more likely to cascade throughout the organization.

VS Case Study - Mental Well Being:

A tenth-grade student faced ongoing struggles with anxiety and depression, which began affecting both attendance and academic performance. At times, the student tried to hide these struggles out of fear of being judged. Victory teachers and counselors emphasized the character pillar of integrity, encouraging the student to be honest about challenges and to seek support rather than conceal difficulties. Through journaling, counseling sessions, and mentorship from staff, the student practiced integrity by speaking openly about mental well-being. This honesty created trust with teachers and allowed personalized supports to be put in place. Over time, the student's academic consistency improved, and confidence grew from living authentically. Integrity helped the student recognize that admitting struggles was not a weakness but a strength. By the end of the year, the student had become a strong advocate for mental health awareness among peers.

Additionally, teachers who feel seen, supported, and respected by their leaders are more likely to demonstrate those same behaviors in their classrooms. Ellyatt (2022) described this as a ripple effect. Emotionally well-regulated, character-driven leaders foster emotionally safe and connected teams, who then nurture emotionally secure and engaged students. The moral ecology of the school is directly shaped by the leader's day-to-day behavior.

This impact extends beyond personal relationships into systemic outcomes. Stokes and Brunzell (2020) found that trauma-informed leaders who intentionally practiced emotional regulation and relational discipline contributed to increased staff cohesion, reduced burnout, and more effective student behavior intervention. In this way, modeling character is not merely a personal virtue. It becomes a lever for school-wide change.

VS Case Study - Physical Abuse:

One middle school boy often flinched when adults raised their voices. Over time, staff learned he had endured physical abuse at home. Our trauma-informed approach ensured he was never shamed for his reactions. Instead, through the pillars of Courage and Patience, and by giving him safe adults to trust, he began to heal. Counseling and mentoring helped him see that asking for help was not weakness but bravery. Eventually, he began advocating for other students, reminding peers, "You don't have to go through things alone."

Reflective Considerations for School Leaders

Stokes (2022) suggests that trauma-informed leadership should not be viewed as a supplementary model but as the instructional core of school design. This includes shifting from compliance-based staff development to supportive environments where adult growth is nurtured through professional learning communities, coaching, and wellness-centered policies. Stokes and Brunzell (2020) emphasize that leaders must model vulnerability and emotional regulation, two practices central to building psychological safety in schools. Ellyat (2022) calls for broader conceptualization of ecosystemic well-being, encouraging leaders to embed emotional, relational, and spiritual dimensions of well-being into the school's culture. This involves system-wide practices such as communal rituals, peer mentoring, restorative discipline, and mindfulness.

Reflective Activity 2: Character in Action Leadership Plan

In this activity, leaders will articulate how they will model character in practice and assess the potential impact of those actions.

Directions:

1. Reflect on the past month of your leadership and answer the following questions:
2. What was one moment where you demonstrated a character strength (i.e., patience, courage, fairness)?
3. Was there a moment where a stronger demonstration of character was needed?
4. How did these actions (or inactions) impact staff or students?
5. Use the VIA Character Strengths framework (https://www.viacharacter.org/) to identify your personal strengths. Then choose two character traits you want to prioritize this semester.
6. What are concrete ways you will model these traits in your interactions (i.e., during staff meetings, discipline conversations, community events)?

Reflect on the impact of these actions using the following questions:

- Who in your school is most likely to be influenced by your character-based leadership?
- What kind of cultural shift would you hope to see over the next six months?
- What feedback looks (i.e., surveys, conversations) will you use to monitor your impact?

These are not just classroom accommodations. Finally, as Turner et al (2024) argue, teachers function as daily models for students, often more powerfully than any formal lesson. Leaders, then, must not only support teachers in healing, but also in becoming intentional role models who embody the traits they wish to instill.

Character-informed leadership is not a static trait. It is a daily, intentional practice that requires both self-awareness and a willingness to engage with the deeper influences that shape your responses. Trauma-informed reflection invites leaders to consider how past experiences affect present-day interactions. By pausing to examine your own leadership behaviors through this lens, clarifying your character commitments, and anticipating the ripple effects of your actions, you take the first steps toward shaping a more compassionate and resilient school culture. The impact of modeling character is rarely immediate, but over time, it creates the conditions for trust, psychological safety, and collective growth. This activity serves not only as a personal reflection, but as a trauma-aware foundation for meaningful systemic transformation.

Bridging Trauma Awareness and Character Education

Character education is not merely about teaching virtues, it is about embodying them. Teachers and leaders carry an unspoken curriculum in their daily actions, known as the hidden curriculum (Turner et al., 2024). Students learn far more from how educators behave under pressure than from what is explicitly taught. Yet, research shows inconsistencies often emerge between stated values and unconscious behaviors. This becomes evident when educators operate under chronic stress of unresolved trauma (Brunzell et al., 2022; Chudzik et al., 2023). In these moments, self-awareness becomes essential. As Peterson (2020) argues, character formation is not just individual but deeply relational and political. When educators reflect on how their own histories and coping mechanisms influence their professional behaviors, they begin to close the gap between intention and impact. Self-knowledge, therefore, is foundational to authentic character formation in schools.

Applying a Trauma-Informed Lens to Character Development

Trauma impacts not just emotional regulation and academic performance, but also the development of character traits like perseverance, empathy, and honesty (Buxton, 2018; Chafouleas et al., 2021). It can delay moral reasoning, stunt relational trust, and promote hypervigilant or avoidant behaviors. This is especially true in children who have experienced chronic adversity.

Promoting virtues in trauma-sensitive ways requires careful discernment. For example, encouraging "grit" without attending to a student's need for rest or emotional support may cause further harm. For example, a teacher could modify the traditional "Star Student of the Week" program by incorporating opportunities for students to recognize each other's character strengths rather than focusing only on academic achievement or perfect attendance.

VS Case Study - Sexual Abuse:

A fourth-grade girl at Victory Schools carried the weight of trauma from sexual abuse, often feeling overwhelmed by sadness and anger. Victory teachers, in partnership with community counseling services, introduced the character pillar of perseverance to help her find strength in moving forward. She was guided to set small, daily goals, such as staying engaged during lessons and participating in group activities. Counseling supported her in processing emotions, while teachers reinforced that perseverance meant not giving up, even when days felt heavy. Over time, she developed resilience and began to rebuild confidence in herself and her abilities. She is now thriving in her classroom, showing that perseverance can help overcome even the most difficult experiences.

Instead of using "honesty" as a reason to issue consequences for lying, a school counselor or school administrator could have a restorative conversation to explore why a student had hidden their involvement in an incident. By identifying underlying fear and shame, the conversation could become one of opportunity to develop integrity through a supportive relationship, rather than through punitive action.

Student development of character strengths varies across adolescence and is shaped by environmental context (Brown et al., 2020). Creating classroom cultures that affirm belonging, as shown by Allen et al., (2018), enhances both emotional safety and moral development. In practice, this might mean co-creating class norms with students, using circle discussions to address conflict, or integrating literature that reflects students' lived experiences and diverse moral dilemmas.

In trauma-informed schools, character education is less about reward and punishment and more about relational connection, consistency, and opportunities for reparative experiences. For example, rather than using immediate suspension after a student outburst, a school administrator could implement a re-entry process that includes reflection questions, an apology plan, and a conversation with a trusted adult. Leaders who embrace this approach foster climates where students not only learn what is good but also feel safe enough to become good.

Healing Centered Engagement

Trauma-informed practices often begin with a shift in perspective moving from "what's wrong with you?" to "what happened to you?" (Perry et al., 1995). Healing-centered engagement extends this by emphasizing the role of compassion, boundaries, and authenticity in professional relationships (Brunzell et al., 2022; Immordino-Yang et al., 2019). It asks educators to see both themselves and their students as whole people shaped by context, capable of growth, and deserving of dignity.

For example, consider a middle school teacher who notices a student repeatedly falling asleep in class. Rather than discipline the behavior as disrespectful, the teacher privately checks in and learns the student is acting as a nighttime caretaker for younger siblings. By offering flexibility on assignments and connecting the family with community resources, the teacher embodies a healing-centered approach, modeling both empathy and accountability.

VS Case Study - Loss and Abandonment:

In tenth grade, a student faced the sudden incarceration of his mother, which led to eviction and displacement for him and his siblings just as the school year was beginning. Carrying the weight of loss and abandonment, he found the courage to reach out to his teachers and coaches, seeking guidance and stability during a time of chaos. Victory Schools responded with compassion and consistency, offering academic flexibility, mentorship, and encouragement on the field and in the classroom. Through the support of caring adults and the structure of both school and sports, he was reminded that even in the hardest circumstances, he had a team behind him and the strength to keep moving forward.

Similarly, a principal might demonstrate healing-centered leadership by setting clear expectations for respectful behavior while also creating spaces for staff to process during weekly debrief sessions. In one school, this included opening staff meetings with a brief mindfulness practice or an optional emotion check-in before diving into agenda items. These practices validate educator well-being while reinforcing the importance of emotional regulation and trust across the adult culture of the school.

Effective character education within this model is **not** about enforcing moral compliance but nurturing moral development through trust, emotional safety, and modeling. As Maurer et al. (2023) suggest, personal growth is a dynamic, nonlinear process that is most supported when individuals feel seen and valued in their environment.

Teaching and Leading from the Inside Out

To cultivate character in others, especially within trauma-informed environments, leaders must begin by nurturing it within themselves. The capacity to lead with empathy, patience, and integrity is often rooted in one's own journey of healing and growth. Students thrive when surrounded by adults who model authenticity, emotional safety, and moral courage. But this kind of leadership requires deep self-awareness.

Reflective Activity 3: Teaching and Leading from the Inside Out

This reflection activity invites you to explore how your personal healing story shapes your ability to guide others in character development.

Directions:

1. Write a journal entry responding to the following prompt:
2. "How has my own healing shaped my ability to guide others in character growth?"

Things to consider:

- What formative experiences have made you more compassionate, resilient, or wise?
- How do your personal struggles inform your patience with student behavior?
- What character traits have you developed through your own healing journey?

The process of healing and character formation within educators is not incidental but foundational to cultivating ethical, emotionally safe learning environments. When leaders confront their own histories with honesty and humility, they become more capable of fostering environments where growth, empathy, and resilience can thrive. Sustaining this kind of leadership requires deliberate habits and relational supports that reinforce self-awareness, inner stability, and moral clarity. Attending to these inner disciplines enables a more embodied, consistent practice of trauma-informed and character-centered education.

Practical Approaches for Educators

A trauma-informed, character-centered approach to education requires more than theoretical understanding. It calls for practical, embodied action that integrates self-awareness, relational integrity, and intentional leadership. For teacher leaders and school administrators, the practices that follow are not prescriptive checklists but invitations into lifelong habits of inner and relational transformation. These practices foster conditions where educators can thrive and cultivate classrooms and schools that promote human flourishing.

Strategies for Ongoing Self-Awareness

Sustained self-awareness is essential for educators working in trauma-impacted and character forming environments. The cognitive, emotional, and moral demands of teaching require inner steadiness and clarity. The work of Perry et al. (1995) underscores how unresolved trauma can shape adult functioning; thus, educators who attend to their own histories are better equipped to remain present and responsive rather than reactive. For teachers and school leaders, practices such as mindfulness, counseling, spiritual directions, or professional supervision provide pathways to increased emotional literacy and self-regulation. These approaches, grounded in the recognition of neurobiological and emotional patterns, promote an internal culture of honesty and grace (Chudzik et al., 2023). In schools that foster a culture of self-reflection, leaders may model these habits by scheduling regular check-ins with mentors or participating in reflective journaling practices that support moral discernment (Maurer et al., 2023).

Peer reflection groups and professional learning communities also serve as key structures for building collective self-awareness. For example, teacher leaders might form voluntary groups that explore how classroom practices reflect values like patience, fairness, or forgiveness. These collaborative spaces normalize emotional processing and support the development of shared moral language across the school community (Brunzell et al., 2022).

Building a Trauma-Informed and Character-Rich Classroom Culture

A trauma-informed and character-rich culture does not emerge from policy alone. It is enacted through daily interactions, structures, and modeled behaviors. Immordino-Yang et al., (2019) emphasize the inherently social nature of learning and brain development, reinforcing the importance of emotionally attuned relationships in the classroom. Teacher leaders play a vital role by modeling vulnerability, respect, and repair in their interactions with students and colleagues. For instance, a teacher might share an experience of personal failure and growth to demonstrate resilience and the value of honesty. Similarly, an administrator might openly acknowledge a misstep in leadership and describe how it is being addressed, modeling accountability and the repair of trust. Such behaviors contribute to a shared culture where character is not simply taught but experienced (Turner et al., 2024).

Embedding reflection and dialogue into classroom routines also cultivates character. Activities such as daily check-ins, restorative circles, and end of week reflections encourage students to engage in self-assessment and relational accountability. Educators can draw on the findings of Allen et al. (2018), who discuss the significance of belonging for student outcomes, to grace these practices as foundational rather than supplementary. For school leaders, providing time, space, and resources for these practices (i.e., scheduled reflection time in staff meetings or incorporating trauma-informed goals into teacher evaluations) reinforces the institutional value of character and emotional safety (Stokes & Brunzell, 2020).

Faith and Spiritual Resilience

For some educators, personal faith and spirituality offer deep sources of strength, healing, and purpose. While not required for trauma-informed or character education, such foundations can be formative and sustaining moral clarity and emotional resilience. Concepts such as grace, forgiveness, redemption, and transformation echo in many spiritual traditions and serve as powerful anchors during the moral complexity of educational work (Peterson, 2020).

Spiritual directions or faith-based peer support groups can offer safe spaces for educators to explore how personal convictions inform professional responsibilities. School administrators working in faith-based context may explicitly integrate opportunities for reflection on vocation, prayer, or ethical discernment as part of professional development. The work of Gunada et al. (2024) and Sanjani (2024) point to the potential of spirituality rooted leadership models to support both personal and communal character development.

Reflective Activity 4: Personal Inventory for Trauma-Informed, Character-Centered Practice

Sustaining trauma-informed and character-centered leadership begins with an honest look inward. The habits, values, and emotional patterns educators bring into their professional lives profoundly shape school culture. This reflective inventory is designed to surface insights about personal strengths, areas of growth, and the alignment between inner life and outward practice. Grounded in the belief that transformation begins with self-awareness, the questions below invite deliberate pause. An opportunity to reconnect with the deeper purpose of teaching and leading with integrity.

- What practices currently support personal healing and growth? Where are additional supports needed?
- In what ways does classroom or leadership behavior reflect core character values such as humility, justice, or compassion?
- What is the current capacity for emotional regulation and perspective-taking during moments of stress or conflict?
- How are forgiveness, grace, and moral repair modeled in professional interactions?
- What is one intentional habit or practice that could support deeper self-awareness or spiritual resilience this month?

Even in secular settings, honoring the role of personal meaning-making in educator well-being can lead to deeper engagement and sustainability. As Ellyat (2022) notes, educational models that prioritize human flourishing must address the full ecosystem of beliefs, values, and inner life.

This reflection can be used as a springboard for dialogue with peers, supervisors, or mentors. Over time, these reflections can serve as guideposts for becoming the kind of educators students need and deserve.

Conclusion

The work of trauma-informed character rich education begins not with programs, or policies but with the moral presence of the educator. Throughout this chapter, a case has been made for reimagining leadership not as authority over others, *but as responsibility for self*. When educators cultivate self-awareness, emotional regulation, and compassion, they become living models of the character strengths they hope to foster in students. This model of leadership transcends compliance-based approaches, replacing control with connection and correction with restoration.

At the heart of this approach lies the integration of healing and character development. Trauma disrupts not only behavior and learning but also moral reasoning, relational trust, and identity formation. Educators who understand this can move beyond simplistic notions of virtue and instead create environments where moral development is relationally nurtured. As discussed, healing centered engagement, consistency, and dignity-driven responses form the foundation of safe, transformative spaces. In such environments, character education becomes not an add-on but a lived expression of school culture.

Leadership, then, becomes a formative practice. Administrators and teachers who engage in ongoing reflection develop a deeper sense of their own moral compass and areas for growth. This reflective posture strengthens their capacity to lead with integrity, especially in moments of tension or ambiguity. By prioritizing their own healing and modeling virtues like humility, fairness, and perseverance, leaders influence not only individual students and staff, but the moral tone of the entire school.

The implementation of this vision cannot rest on individual efforts alone. Schools must invest in the structures that support this work: professional learning communities that prioritize emotional safety, systems of care that value dignity, and leadership development that is rooted in both ethical practice and trauma awareness. Sustained change requires environments where educators are seen not just as professionals, but as people capable of growth, deserving of support, and central to school transformation.

Ultimately, the journey toward trauma-informed and character-centered leadership is both deeply personal and inherently communal. It calls educators to embody the very hope, resilience, and moral clarity they wish to cultivate in their students. When school leaders embrace this path, they become catalysts for the kind of flourishing that extends far beyond the classroom. In becoming who students need, they also become who they were meant to be.

Leading a School Community

Prioritizing the Foundations

Foundations to consider when implementing trauma informed character education initiatives within a school include:

- Shared Understanding
- Audit for Awareness
- Professional Development
- Theory of Action
- Shared Language and Core Values
- Culture and Environment
- Relationships

These foundations are elaborated upon below.

Becoming a school that integrates trauma-informed practices with character education is not simply about adding a new initiative to an already full plate, it is a fundamental shift in perspective, culture, and leadership. This shift requires moving beyond managing surface-level behaviors toward intentionally creating environments that foster healing, safety, resilience, and the development of positive character strengths. At its core, this work recognizes that a student's ability to live out a school's core values such as respect, responsibility, empathy, or caring is deeply connected to their sense of safety, emotional regulation, and belonging. Without that foundation, character traits remain abstract ideals rather than lived, daily realities.

The journey begins not with a purchased curriculum or new classroom rules, but with a collective commitment to seeing students through a dual lens: as developing human beings shaped both by their growth in character and by their lived experiences, including trauma. This requires leaders and educators to ask, "How can we nurture a child's strengths and values while also addressing the impact of adversity?" The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) offers the "4 R's" framework; realize the prevalence and impact of trauma, recognize its signs, respond with appropriate strategies, and resist retraumatization (NCTSN, 2017).

Models like Marvin Berkowitz's PRIMED framework help bridge this connection by emphasizing *Prioritization*, *Relationships*, *Intrinsic Motivation*, *Modeling*, *Empowerment*, and *Developmental Pedagogy*. These components resonate with trauma-informed practice, particularly in their focus on relational trust, empowerment of student voice, and creating meaning through values-based instruction. Similarly, the Canyon Center for Character Education's Framework for Purposeful Cultures of Character outlines a three-part journey: *Individual Learning*, *Leading a Community with Character*, and *Serving with Character*. This approach reinforces that character is *caught* (through modeling), *taught* (through intentional lessons), and *sought* (through authentic opportunities for students to live out virtues), mirroring trauma-informed schools' emphasis on adult self-awareness, relational safety, and collective responsibility.

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues further emphasizes the central role of *practical wisdom*, the intellectual virtue that enables students and adults to navigate moral complexity, make good decisions, and act in pursuit of human flourishing. By promoting intellectual, moral, civic, and performance virtues in balance, the Jubilee framework acknowledges that character development is developmental, relational, and context-sensitive, principles echoed in both trauma-informed education and responsive pedagogy. Similarly, Character.org's 11 Principles Framework, which includes creating a caring school community, providing meaningful opportunities for student leadership, and engaging families and staff as partners, offers essential guidance for creating the whole-school coherence required to sustain trauma-informed character work.

When viewed through the integrated lens of these frameworks, the 4Rs of trauma-informed care are not just reactive strategies but become proactive design principles embedded in every facet of school life. However, this transformation should never be rushed. Lasting change requires preparation, shared vision, and strategic planning. Before launching any new initiative, schools must "prime the pump" by building readiness among staff, clarifying the connections between trauma-informed care and character education, and assessing the systems already in place. When leaders take the time to establish a strong foundation, they avoid the common pitfall of adding new expectations without coherence or support, which can lead to burnout and resistance.

VS Case Study - Poverty:

A seventh-grade boy at Victory Schools faced food insecurity at home, often coming to school hungry but too embarrassed to ask for help. This affected his focus in class and his participation in extracurricular activities. Victory teachers connected him with the district's Angel Program and emphasized the character pillar of responsibility. He learned that responsibility included taking ownership of his needs and making healthy choices to support his learning. With encouragement, he began consistently accessing school meals and utilizing Angel Program resources, which allowed him to show up prepared for class each day. Over time, he embraced responsibility by advocating for himself and encouraging friends to seek help when needed. As a result, his academic performance and confidence improved significantly. Today, he is thriving in his classroom, demonstrating that responsibility can transform vulnerability into strength.

Build a Shared Understanding

The first phase of this journey is about aligning mindsets and systems, helping leaders and educators understand how trauma impacts learning and behavior, and how intentional character development can serve as both a preventive and restorative force. It also means building a culture of trust among staff, so they can collaborate, take risks, and sustain the work for the long term. In this way, trauma-informed character education becomes not just another initiative, but the heartbeat of a school's culture.

The most critical step in the journey toward integrating trauma-informed practices with character education is building a shared understanding of why this work matters, then grounding that understanding in a clear picture of your school's current reality. Trauma-informed practices are not the latest educational trend; they are a direct response to decades of research showing how adversity impacts brain development, learning, and behavior. The landmark ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences) study (Felitti et al., 1998) revealed a powerful link between early trauma and later physical, emotional, and academic struggles. More recent neuroscience from the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard confirms that chronic stress can impair executive functioning, emotional regulation, and memory, all of which are essential for students to thrive academically and socially. In this context, character education is not just about teaching values like respect, empathy, and perseverance, it's about creating the safe, regulated, and connected environments students need in order to live those values.

Audit for Awareness

Once staff and leadership share a clear and compelling "why" for integrating trauma-informed practices with character education, the next critical step is conducting an honest, detailed 360° audit of your school's current state. This is the foundation on which every other decision will rest and skipping it is one of the biggest reasons well-intentioned initiatives stall. A true audit goes beyond a quick checklist; it's a deep dive into your people, programs, policies, and priorities to identify what's already working, where the gaps are, and how to move forward without overwhelming staff or doing different things in pockets of the school.

Start with staff skill mapping, create an inventory of who already has training or expertise in trauma-informed practices, social-emotional learning, restorative approaches, or character education. This will reveal expertise on your team and who can help lead or model new practices. Next, look at existing initiatives i.e., Responsive Classroom, Leader in Me, class meetings, advisory periods etc. and assess how trauma-sensitive and character-focused strategies could be layered into these rather than replaced. This will help with preserving continuity and honoring the work staff are already doing.

Examine time structures in your schedule with a realistic lens: Where could ongoing professional development (PD), coaching, or reflection time fit without adding to burnout? Could professional learning communities (PLCs) be repurposed for micro-PD? Could early-release or late-start days be leveraged for deeper training? Review budget allocations to see what professional learning or program costs are already covered, and identify opportunities to reallocate funds toward higher-impact strategies. This is also the moment to explore non-monetary resources, partnerships with local universities, mental health agencies, or community organizations that could provide training, materials, or space at little to no cost.

An effective audit also looks at school climate and culture data: staff surveys, student perception surveys, SEL screeners, attendance patterns, and discipline referrals. These data points offer concrete evidence of where strengths exist (i.e., strong teacher student relationships) and where there's urgent need (i.e., high suspension rates for specific groups). Tools like the Trauma-Informed Schools Implementation Assessment (TIISA), the TREP Survey, or the PRIMED Character Education Self-Assessment can give a structured, research-based framework for your evaluation.

Finally, communicate the audit process transparently with staff and, when appropriate, families. Invite their perspectives, because getting everyone on board starts when people feel seen and heard. By the end of this step, you should have a clear, data-informed snapshot of your school's readiness, resources, and roadblocks, a map that ensures every next step is strategic, and rooted in reality rather than just aspiration.

Professional Development

High-quality professional development for trauma-informed character education does not have to be out of reach for schools with limited budgets. In fact, many schools face the significant roadblock of limited funds for high-quality training, but with creativity, strategic planning, and a commitment to ongoing learning, meaningful and sustainable growth is still possible. The key is to design professional development that is job-embedded, collaborative, and connected to daily practice, while leveraging internal expertise, free resources, and community partnerships to keep costs low and impact high.

Some book ideas to get you started:

The Educator's Guide to Building Child and Family Resilience, Michelle Myers and Robert Mayes make a compelling case that building resilience is not simply a character trait to admire in students, it's a concrete, teachable, and essential trauma-informed practice that should be embedded in a school's leadership vision. For school administrators, this perspective reframes trauma-informed care from a reactive set of interventions into a proactive system of support that empowers students, families, and educators. The book
emphasizes that when schools commit to building the core resilience capacities, strong relationships,
positive self-identity, curiosity and motivation, flexible thinking, and altruism, they create conditions that allow all children to thrive, especially those navigating adversity.

In *Connections Over Compliance*, Dr. Lori Desautels presents a powerful paradigm shift for educators and school leaders: rather than managing student behavior through control and compliance, we must create learning environments that prioritize connection, co-regulation, and compassion. Drawing on neuroscience, trauma research, and real-world classroom examples, Desautels challenges traditional disciplinary systems and offers practical strategies to support both students and staff. One of the most important takeaways is the idea that behavior is communication, often a signal of dysregulation rather than defiance. When educators interpret challenging behavior through a brain-based lens, they move from punishment to curiosity, asking "What happened to this child?" instead of "What's wrong with this child?"
In *Beyond Behaviors*, Dr. Mona Delahooke provides a compassionate, neuroscience-based framework that aligns seamlessly with the principles of becoming a trauma-informed school. A key takeaway is her assertion that behavior is a reflection of the nervous system rather than simply a choice. What educators often interpret as defiance or disrespect may, in fact, be a student's stress response,fight, flight, or freeze, triggered by a nervous system that feels unsafe. This understanding calls on schools to shift from punitive or compliance-driven discipline models to approaches that prioritize safety, regulation, and support. Dr. Delahooke emphasizes that connection and relational safety must come before compliance, a concept at the heart of trauma-informed practice. When educators build strong, trusting relationships and create predictable environments, they signal safety to a child's brain, allowing learning and regulation to flourish.

In *Restorative Practices at School*, Becky McCammon offers a practical, heartfelt, and deeply human approach to transforming school culture through connection, accountability, and healing. One of the top takeaways for school leaders and staff is the idea that restorative practices are not just about repairing harm, they are about building and sustaining relationships before harm occurs. McCammon emphasizes that proactive community-building circles, daily check-ins, and relational rituals help prevent conflict by strengthening trust and belonging across classrooms and campuses. A second key insight is the importance of listening over lecturing. In restorative work, adults must learn to sit in discomfort, holding space for student voices, and resist the urge to control the narrative. This shift from *power over* to *power with,* fosters mutual respect and dignity, even when behavior must be addressed.

In *Supporting Students' Motivation: Strategies for Success*, John Marshall Reeve draws on decades of research in motivation science, particularly Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to offer educators a practical, evidence-based framework for creating learning environments where all students can thrive. At the heart of the book is the idea that students are naturally motivated to learn when their basic psychological needs are met: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. One of the most significant takeaways for school leaders and staff is that motivation is not fixed or internal, it is shaped by the classroom environment and adult behaviors. When teachers shift from controlling to autonomy-supportive strategies, students show higher engagement, deeper learning, and more emotional investment.

In *The Whole-Brain Child*, Dr. Daniel J. Siegel and Dr. Tina Payne Bryson blend neuroscience and child development research to provide educators and caregivers with practical strategies for fostering healthy brain integration in children. The core premise is that a child's brain is still developing, particularly the connections between the emotional "right brain" and the logical "left brain" and that intentional adult responses can help bridge these systems for better self-regulation, decision-making, and resilience. For school leaders and staff, one of the most important takeaways is that challenging behaviors often stem from an underdeveloped capacity for integration, not defiance or lack of character. By responding with strategies that engage both hemispheres and connect the "upstairs brain" (responsible for reasoning and planning) with the "downstairs brain" (involved in survival and emotional reactivity), educators can help students move from reactivity to reflection. This brain-based approach not only supports social-emotional growth but also strengthens the foundation for character development, making it a critical tool for schools aiming to become more trauma-informed and resilience-focused.

In *The Body Keeps the Score*, Dr. Bessel van der Kolk draws on decades of research in neuroscience, psychology, and trauma therapy to reveal how traumatic experiences are stored in both the mind and body, profoundly shaping behavior, relationships, and learning. At the heart of the book is the idea that trauma is not just a past event, it is a lived experience that can continue to disrupt a person's sense of safety, regulation, and connection unless it is addressed through healing relationships and body-based interventions. One of the most significant takeaways for school leaders and staff is that students' emotional and behavioral challenges often have roots in unprocessed trauma, not willful defiance. By creating environments that emphasize safety, trust, and emotional attunement and by integrating practices such as mindfulness, movement, and expressive arts, educators can help students regulate their nervous systems, engage more fully in learning, and begin to rebuild resilience. This understanding is essential for schools committed to trauma-informed, whole-child education.

In *Promoting Resilience in Preschoolers*, Ann S. Masten and Jelena Obradović draw on extensive research in developmental psychology and early childhood education to offer educators and caregivers a practical, evidence-based framework for fostering resilience in young children. At the heart of the book is the idea that resilience, the capacity to adapt and thrive despite adversity, is not a fixed trait but a set of skills and supports that can be intentionally nurtured through consistent relationships, responsive caregiving, and enriching environments. One of the most significant takeaways for school leaders and staff is that protective factors such as emotional regulation, problem-solving skills, and secure attachments form the foundation for both academic readiness and long-term well-being. By embedding these supports into daily routines, modeling positive coping strategies, and building strong partnerships with families, educators can create preschool environments that buffer against the effects of stress and lay the groundwork for lifelong learning and resilience.

One effective approach is micro-PD, dedicating 10–15 minutes of each staff meeting or PLC to a single trauma-informed or character education strategy. This short, targeted format builds a shared toolkit over time without overwhelming staff or taking them away from their classrooms. Schools can expand on this with micro-PD modules, short, 15-minute videos or slide decks delivered weekly in team meetings or asynchronously, ensuring consistent, bite-sized learning.

The train-the-trainer model remains one of the most cost-effective and sustainable options. By sending a Core Leadership Team to in-depth training, schools develop in-house experts who can facilitate PD for colleagues. This keeps expertise within the building and ensures that knowledge can be passed on to new staff. Similarly, peer learning rounds, where pilot teachers open their classrooms for observation, allow colleagues to see trauma-informed and character-building practices in action, followed by reflective debriefs that strengthen shared ownership of the work.

Book study cohorts are another powerful and affordable option. Organizing staff book clubs around core texts not only deepens knowledge but also fosters dialogue. Individuals can then share key takeaways with the broader team, multiplying the impact of a single resource.

There are countless valuable books available, but the most impactful studies are those intentionally chosen to align with your school's specific goals and current readiness for the work. Take time to research and select titles that not only deepen understanding of trauma-informed practices and character education, but also meet your staff where they are on the learning journey, ensuring that discussions feel relevant, engaging, and actionable.

Finally, curating free, high-quality online resources from organizations like the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard, and Character.org ensures that PD remains evidence-based and aligned with best practices, at no cost.
Research from DuFour & Fullan (2013) reinforces that ongoing, job-embedded PD is far more likely to result in sustained change than one-off workshops. By blending readiness assessment, distributed leadership, and these creative, cost-effective PD strategies, schools can make the shift to a trauma-informed, character-driven environment not just possible, but enduring.

Finding Resources

As your school deepens its commitment to becoming a trauma-informed, character education environment, it's essential to remember that more great resources may lie beyond your school walls. The expertise, networks, and support available in your community can significantly expand your capacity, often at little to no cost, while reinforcing the message that resilience and character development are collective responsibilities. By strategically cultivating partnerships, schools can create a richer, more integrated web of support for students and families.

Begin by identifying local organizations, agencies, and leaders whose missions align with your work. Partnering with local mental health agencies can provide access to school-based counseling hours, co-led professional development, and trauma-informed coaching for staff. Community centers, libraries, and faith-based organizations can offer after-school character-building programs that align with school values, giving students consistent reinforcement of skills like empathy, perseverance, and respect outside the classroom. You can also invite local trauma-informed practitioners, therapists, social workers, or nonprofit leaders to serve on a *Community Advisory Team* that guides school initiatives and offers real-world perspectives.

From a funding perspective, pursue grants from local foundations or leverage existing resources like Title I and Title IV funding to cover professional learning, program materials, or family engagement events. The process begins with creating a *Community Asset Map*, a simple but powerful tool that helps identify potential partners, available resources, and opportunities for collaboration. This mapping process not only reveals untapped supports, but also strengthens relationships with community stakeholders who share your commitment to student well-being and character development.

One of the most common pitfalls in school transformation efforts especially in complex work like integrating trauma-informed practices with character education is trying to do too much too soon without a clear roadmap. Even the most passionate vision will fizzle if it's not paired with intentional pacing, structured milestones, and ongoing accountability. A strong strategic timeline prevents overwhelm, reduces initiative fatigue, and ensures that every step builds on the last. It transforms the work from a hopeful idea into a structured journey that steadily gains momentum and becomes woven into the school's culture.

A Theory of Action

Creating a theory of action is a pivotal step in guiding your school's journey toward becoming a trauma-informed and character education environment. At its core, a theory of action is a clear, cause-and-effect roadmap that articulates *if we do X, then Y will happen*. It forces leaders to think intentionally about the connection between actions and outcomes, ensuring that every initiative, training, and system change is anchored to a larger vision. For example: *If we provide all staff with sustained, job-embedded professional learning on trauma-informed practices and explicitly integrate our core values into daily routines, then students will experience increased emotional safety, stronger relationships, and improved self-regulation skills leading to higher engagement and academic success.* This clarity prevents scattershot efforts and builds coherence across all levels of the organization.

VS Case Study - Isolation:

A middle school student who had missed more than 40 days of school the prior year entered VCA resistant and disengaged. Staff worked with him daily, setting small attendance goals and celebrating wins. His mentor conversations emphasized the pillar of Responsibility — showing up matters. Teachers made class a safe, welcoming place, and staff called home every morning when he was absent. Within a semester, he had perfect attendance, and by year's end, he proudly received the Responsibility award at our assembly. His mother later said, "For the first time, my son wants to go to school every morning."

From that theory of action, leaders can create specific, measurable goals supported by lead and lag measures. Lead measures are the *actions and behaviors we control*, the proactive indicators that predict success. In this work, lead measures might include: the percentage of staff trained in trauma-informed strategies, the number of classrooms implementing daily morning meetings tied to school values, or the frequency of co-regulation strategies observed during walkthroughs. Lag measures, on the other hand, are the *outcomes we aim to influence*, indicators that show whether the work is making the intended impact. These could include reductions in office discipline referrals, increases in student SEL competency scores, improved attendance rates, or positive shifts in school climate survey data.

The power of pairing lead and lag measures is that it keeps teams focused on what they can *do now* to influence future results, while also holding them accountable to tracking whether those actions are producing meaningful change. Regularly reviewing these measures, quarterly or even monthly, allows leadership teams to celebrate progress, identify obstacles, and adjust strategies before problems become entrenched. In short, a well-crafted theory of action with aligned lead and lag measures transforms the work from a vague aspiration into a disciplined, trackable process that steadily moves the school toward its vision of being a safe, supportive, and values-driven community for all students.

A strong theory of action becomes even more powerful when it's paired with a clear set of milestones that outline what success will look like at various points in the journey. Milestones provide a shared vision of progress, helping leaders, staff, and students know what's expected of them, and what they can expect from one another, at each stage of transformation toward a trauma-informed, character-focused environment.
They also make the work feel tangible, showing that small, intentional steps add up to big cultural shifts.

For leaders, early milestones might include what was previously mentioned; completing a full 360° school audit, forming a Core Leadership Team, and communicating the theory of action to all stakeholders. By the end of the first semester, leaders might aim to have 100% of staff trained in foundational trauma-informed and character education principles, observed in practice at least once, and provided with coaching feedback.

A year-one milestone could be that every school system, discipline policies, SEL curriculum, family engagement strategies, has been reviewed and aligned with the school's core values and trauma-informed principles. By year two, leader expectations might expand to embedding these practices into hiring, onboarding, and evaluation processes, ensuring they are sustained long-term.

For teachers and staff, milestones can track both professional learning and classroom application.

- In the first quarter, every teacher might commit to implementing one trauma-informed regulation strategy and one character-building activity into their daily routines.
- By midyear, teachers could be facilitating daily morning meetings that intentionally connect SEL skills with the school's values, using strategies learned through PD or peer coaching.
- By the end of year one, a milestone could be that 90% of classrooms consistently integrate co-regulation practices, restorative conversations, and explicit character language into lessons and interactions.

Over time, staff milestones might also include leading peer PD sessions, mentoring colleagues in trauma-informed strategies, and modeling practices for visitors or new hires.

For students, milestones focus on developing habits that support resilience, self-regulation, and positive character traits. Early benchmarks could include students demonstrating the use of simple regulation strategies (i.e., breathing exercises, taking a break) with minimal prompting, or being able to articulate at least one of the school's core values and how it applies in real life.

- By the end of the first year, a milestone might be that students can identify their emotions, communicate their needs respectfully, and participate in restorative conversations.
- In later stages, students might take on leadership roles, facilitating parts of morning meetings, mentoring younger peers, or leading service projects that reflect the school's values.

These milestones should be tracked using lead and lag measures.

- For example, a *lead measure* might be "All staff integrate a morning meeting routine three times a week," while the *lag measure* could be "A 20% increase in students reporting they feel safe and connected to school on the annual climate survey."
- A *lead measure* for students might be "Students participate in SEL skill practice twice a week," with the *lag measure* being "Reduction in behavioral referrals for emotional dysregulation."When leaders, teachers, and students all see themselves in the milestone map, accountability becomes a shared responsibility, and the vision of becoming a trauma-informed, character-centered school moves from a lofty goal to an achievable, trackable reality.

VS Case Study - Substance Abuse:

A 2nd grader's home life was chaotic, with parents battling substance abuse. She often arrived at school hungry and withdrawn. Teachers provided breakfast and a consistent morning routine, grounding her in the pillars of patience and tolerance. Over time, her behavior stabilized, and she began mentoring younger students in reading. Her mother, inspired by the stability her daughter found at school, entered a recovery program. This case showed us that when we invest in children, we often change families too.

Determining Core Values

"Character education programs, grounded in core values, help students develop into ethical and empathetic individuals. They are essential for fostering a sense of belonging, accountability, and respect for diversity, which are crucial in K-12 education."

-Character.org

Core values are fundamental principles or standards that guide behavior, decision-making, and actions within a community or organization. They provide the foundation for creating ethical practices and shaping attitudes. In schools, core values represent the ideals that both educators and students strive to uphold (Lickona, 1991). These values encompass cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of strong character. Schools must clearly outline these expectations to help students understand how to navigate life in various communities, whether in relationships, at home, or in school. Central to character education is teaching students core values that foster positive and meaningful interactions within these communities.

Having well-established core values in a school setting is essential, as they provide a consistent framework for both students and staff. These values must be deeply embedded in the school's culture and daily practices, creating a lasting impact on students' lives and their communities. For students, particularly those from unstable or traumatic backgrounds, predictability and structure are vital for emotional safety and academic readiness (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2016; Souers & Hall, 2016). Core values create an environment where students understand expected behaviors, offering them a sense of security. Establishing these values helps build trust and respect among students, teachers, and families. Core values must be embedded in all of the school culture, teaching, practice and in discipline, creating an affirming environment for students, especially for those who struggle, act out, or come from adverse home situations.

Furthermore, when core values are clearly defined and practiced, they contribute to a safe environment that supports positive emotional and academic growth, ultimately reducing the likelihood of disruptive behavior and adverse outcomes (Osher et al., 2010; Souers & Hall, 2016). When core values become the common or shared language in a school, everyone shares the exact words to describe what matters most. It is important for schools to involve the community in determining this shared language to be used, based on the community needs. As each school community of students, staff, and families differ in their perspectives, gathering feedback and integrating it all into a shared definition is essential in the

VS Case Study - Loss and Abandonment:

A first-grade male student at Victory Schools struggled after experiencing the loss and abandonment of a parent. He often acted out in frustration, had difficulty trusting adults, and avoided forming close friendships with peers. Victory teachers recognized the emotional weight he carried and introduced the character pillar of tolerance to help him navigate his feelings. Through class lessons, modeling, and guided discussions, he learned that tolerance meant accepting differences in people and situations, even when they felt confusing or unfair. Teachers supported him in practicing tolerance with peers during group activities and with himself when emotions became overwhelming. Over time, he grew more patient in handling disappointment and more open to building friendships. Small successes, such as waiting his turn during games or listening calmly to a classmate, were celebrated as steps toward growth. By the end of the year, he showed greater emotional stability, demonstrating that tolerance could help him manage both his inner struggles and his relationships on campus

VS Case Study - PTSD:

A fifth-grade boy at Victory Schools developed PTSD after being exposed to a frightening event on the news that deeply unsettled him. He became restless in class, struggled to focus, and often grew frustrated when tasks didn't come easily. Victory teachers and counseling partners guided him in practicing the character pillar of patience. He learned strategies such as slowing down, asking for help calmly, and recognizing that progress takes time. Teachers reinforced this with structured routines and gentle reminders, celebrating each success in waiting his turn or persevering through an assignment. Over time, he grew more confident and less reactive, building stronger relationships with peers and teachers. By the end of the year, his ability to practice patience allowed him to regain control of his emotions and succeed academically and socially.

groundwork phase.
Having futile definitions of values will inhibit internalization with students as it will not be relevant to their lives. Establishing shared vocabulary makes expectations clear, celebrates positive behavior, and guides how we treat one another. For students who have experienced trauma, hearing those exact affirming words from many caring adults builds trust, consistency, and a stronger sense of belonging. Many schools adopt a set of core values that mirror the principles they want to promote in both students and staff internalization.

Example Core Values:

Respect - Encourages students to value themselves, others, and their environment.

Responsibility - Helps students understand that their choices have consequences, empowering them to influence their success.

Integrity - Reinforces honesty and the importance of doing the right thing, even when no one is watching. Integrity fosters trust between students and staff, creating a safer, more predictable environment.

Kindness/Compassion - Models empathy and caring for others.
Perseverance/Resilience - Teaches students to keep trying despite challenges.

Safety - Ensures that students know their physical and emotional well-being is a priority.

Integrating core values into trauma-informed practices ensures that every interaction and decision is grounded in both compassion and consistency, creating an environment where students feel safe, valued, and empowered to grow. Trauma-informed practices focus on recognizing the impact of trauma and adjusting school environments and interactions accordingly (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014; Walkley & Cox, 2013). Core values are central to these practices, as they guide educators in providing support that acknowledges students' trauma while promoting healing. The intersection of core values and trauma-informed practices creates a compassionate school culture where students are more likely to thrive, even in the face of challenges.

To fully integrate core values with trauma-informed practices, schools can draw on the National Center for School Safety's Six Principles of Trauma-Informed Schools. These principles offer a clear framework for identifying and reinforcing the core values that best support students who have experienced trauma.

VS Case Study - Incarcerated Parents:

One of our students entered VCA with his father incarcerated for murder. Angry and deeply mistrustful, he once posted a video online holding a Glock and was expelled from other schools. We took him in. Twice, his choices forced us to long-term suspend him, but every time, we welcomed him back. Staff invested in daily mentoring conversations, clear boundaries, and relentless relationship-building. We focused on the pillars of Integrity, Courage, and Compassion, modeling what it meant to own mistakes and repair harm. Slowly, trust replaced hostility. By his senior year, he walked across the graduation stage — not because he was perfect, but because he finally believed he had a future worth fighting for.

Practical Strategies

Safety - Safe environments consist of ensuring physical, academic, social, and behavioral safety in the school environment. When schools cultivate core values based on social and psychological safety, it allows students to develop a sense of belonging and interpersonal confidence. Students also have the ability to share emotions, both positive and negative, when they feel safe. This helps students regulate their emotions. Many schools will use safety as a visible core value because it communicates that all students, including those with adverse experiences, have the stability needed to grow in character. Safety also aligns with other core values such as *respect*, *care*, and *protection*.

Trustworthiness -Trustworthiness includes task clarity, consistency, and interpersonal boundaries between individuals, groups, and all members of the school community. Trustworthiness is not only a core value on its own but is a cornerstone that supports the practice of many other values in character education. In trauma-informed settings, trustworthiness is especially vital as it reassures students that adults' words and actions will match, which reduces anxiety and builds a sense of safety. Without trustworthiness, even well-intended lessons on kindness, respect, or empathy can fall flat; with it, those values have a solid foundation to take root and grow. Trustworthiness aligns with other core values like *integrity*, *honesty*, and *reliability*.

Student Voice and Empowerment - Schools should maximize student and family input. School staff can include students and families in the development or refinement of core values. This helps move the concept of core values from abstract ideas to lived, personal commitments. Empowerment also reinforces ownership of values, which means students are more likely to internalize the core values. In a trauma-informed context, student voice directly supports safety and agency, counteracting the powerlessness that many trauma-impacted students have experienced. Student voice and empowerment align with other core values like *respect*, *self-advocacy*, and *accountability*.

Collaboration - Facilitate collaboration and sharing power. In a trauma-informed setting, collaboration builds safety and belonging as students see that they are part of a community where contributions are valued, mistakes are learning opportunities, and differences are strengths. It shifts the learning culture from competition to collective growth, reinforcing the idea that core values are not just personal traits, but community commitments. Collaboration aligns with other care values like *fairness*, *teamwork*, and *shared responsibility*.

Peer Support - Provide help and support to each other, for both students and staff. This creates a protective network where students feel less isolated and more willing to take healthy risks, such as trying a new skill or voicing an opinion. Peer support aligns with other core values like *kindness*, *empathy*, and *responsibility.*

Inclusion and engagement - Practice inclusion, seek to prevent discrimination, and celebrate the unique aspects of the school community. Inclusion is a voice in decision-making, not just a seat at the table. Inclusion and engagement align with other core values like *connectedness*, *equity*, and *respect*.

Schools must establish a strong foundation of core values while integrating trauma-informed practices alongside these values. Core values teach students what to strive for, but they do not provide guidance on how to achieve these goals, particularly during moments of stress or emotional overwhelm (McEwen & McEwen, 2017). Teaching emotional skills can help reconnect students' thinking processes with their core values. When schools teach a core value and pair it with emotional skills, it allows students to internalize both the moral expectation and the emotional capacity to meet it (Elias et al., 2008). For example, when teaching the core value of respect, schools can prepare students to respect their emotions and learn how to express them appropriately (emotional regulation). This approach also emphasizes the importance of respecting others' processes. Incorporating emotional skills and trauma-informed practices into character education helps students practice emotional regulation, conflict resolution, and self-care, all skills that are invaluable for both academic and personal success.

Core values are foundational to the development of character education in K-12 schools. They provide a clear framework for interactions and experiences that help establish a positive, supportive school environment. When combined with trauma-informed practices, these values create an atmosphere that nurtures emotional well-being and promotes healing for students who have faced adversity. The integration of skills centered around emotion within the context of core values further enhances students' ability to manage stress and emotions, contributing to their overall growth and resilience. By firmly establishing and living these core values, schools help students not only succeed academically but also develop into compassionate, ethical individuals prepared to navigate the complexities of the world.

As shared, having core values within a school is a foundational piece that also requires time and commitment. It may be a consideration for a milestone and should be a part of your theory of action. According to the US Department of Education, "Character education is a learning process that enables students and adults in a school community to understand, care about, and act on core ethical values such as respect, justice, civic virtue, and citizenship and responsibility for self and others. Upon such core values, we form the attitudes and actions that are hallmarks of safe, healthy, and informed communities that serve as the foundation of our society." (ed.gov, 2018) A strong character education approach establishes core values by creating a framework for applying these skills in real-life situations while fostering a supportive and respectful school culture. Core values serve as guardrails that help keep students safe as they navigate challenges and changes.

VS Case Study - Loss and Abandonment:

In fifth grade, a student faced the heartbreaking reality of losing a parent. Each day felt uncertain as he tried to move forward without that guiding presence of both parents that he was accustomed to. Victory Schools supported him with compassion and consistency, teaching him what resilience looked like—taking one step at a time, finding strength in routine, and leaning on trusted adults for encouragement. Through this daily guidance, he began to understand that while his loss would always be part of his story, he had the strength and support to be okay, and that we as a community would offer him 100 percent support.

Culture and Environment

Another foundational condition necessary for this work is consideration of a trusting and safe environment. When core values are consistently modeled and reinforced, they naturally cultivate the trust and sense of safety that form the cornerstone of a thriving school community (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Trust and safety are the foundational tenets for creating an environment where students can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. Without a sense of trust in their educators and safety within their environment, students may struggle with engagement, motivation, and even basic participation in school activities (Souers & Hall, 2016). Trust and safety are not abstract ideals, they are the conditions that allow strong, meaningful relationships to take root and thrive. In schools, this applies not only to the bonds between students, teachers, and peers, but also to the relational trust between administrators and teachers. Trust and safety serve as the foundation for building strong, meaningful relationships among students, teachers, and peers. It also highlights the critical role of relational trust between administrators and teachers, as well as the trust shared among educators within professional learning communities (Louis, Marks, & Kruse, 1996).

The development of trust and safety in schools is closely tied to both character education and trauma-informed practices. When students feel secure and supported, they are better able to engage with character education that helps them develop essential life skills, such as empathy, responsibility, and integrity. Additionally, trauma-informed practices rely on creating a predictable and safe environment to help students who have experienced trauma feel empowered to heal and grow. Trust in schools is built through consistency, honesty, and the feeling that students can depend on their educators and peers to act in predictable and supportive ways. Safety, both physical and emotional, is a state where students feel secure, free from harm, and valued in their classroom environment. Emotional safety includes being able to express oneself without fear of judgment or retribution. Physical safety involves being in an environment where students are not at risk of harm or bullying. Trust is the glue that holds relationships together. In a classroom, when students trust their teachers, they feel comfortable asking questions, taking risks, and engaging deeply with the curriculum (Hamre & Pianta, 2006). This is especially critical in a trauma-informed setting, where students may have difficulty trusting authority figures due to past negative experiences. Positive teacher-student relationships built on trust can have a profound impact on a student's academic engagement and emotional well-being.

Character education is more effective when students feel trusted and safe. Core values like respect, responsibility, and fairness can only be internalized when students feel secure in their environment and relationships (Lickona, 1991). A student who feels emotionally safe is more likely to engage with concepts like honesty and empathy, as these values are often difficult to understand and apply without emotional security. Additionally, when students feel safe and trusted, they are more likely to practice these values in their interactions with others, fostering a positive classroom culture. For example, a student who trusts that their teacher will listen to them may be more likely to practice active listening with peers. When trust is established, students feel more confident in exploring moral questions and learning from mistakes. For instance, if a student makes a poor decision, a trusted teacher can help them understand how their actions impact others and work together to find a restorative solution. This approach not only teaches accountability but also nurtures the student's capacity to reflect and grow emotionally and ethically.

VS Case Study - Displacement and Homelessness:

A student who had bounced between shelters and relatives' homes came to us tired of starting over. Victory provided stability through mentoring, predictable routines, and daily emphasis on Perseverance. Staff celebrated every milestone — from finishing homework to showing up on time. With consistent support, he not only stayed enrolled all year, but earned Honor Roll. For a child who once thought, "Why try if I'll just have to move again?" perseverance became his defining trait.

VS Case Study - Displacement and Homelessness:

A Seventh grade student at Victory Schools faced the challenges of displacement and homelessness, bouncing around wherever this family could find a place. Through consistent support and encouragement, school became a safe space where stability and belonging were slowly restored. The student not only found success in the classroom but also excelled on the flag football field - becoming a school leader and "fan favorite" amongst his peers. This student is now a Varsity football player at his current school.

Integrating character values into these practices ensures that students experience a consistent framework of dignity, respect, and accountability. Values such as empathy, fairness, and responsibility guide how educators respond to student behavior and how students learn to interact with one another. When schools intentionally embed these values into daily routines and interactions, they not only address the impact of trauma but also foster moral growth. Modeling and reinforcing respect in classroom discussions allows students to feel valued and heard, while emphasizing responsibility helps them take ownership of their actions in a supportive rather than punitive way (Character.org, 2023).

Teachers may also use restorative practices to rebuild trust after harm has been done, assisting students to understand their actions and restore relationships compassionately and constructively (Evans & Vaandering, 2016). Restorative practices are a natural bridge between trauma-informed approaches and character education. Rather than focusing on punishment, they emphasize repairing harm, rebuilding relationships, and reinforcing shared values. Restorative circles, for instance, provide a structured setting where students can voice their feelings, listen to peers, and collaboratively identify ways to move forward. These practices not only promote healing after conflict but also strengthen the school community by teaching students that mistakes are opportunities for growth, forgiveness, and renewed trust (Gregory & Evans, 2020).

Practical strategies to enhance trust with students include:

Building predictable routines: Ensure that students know what to expect throughout the day. Building trust starts with strong, supportive relationships. Teachers can develop these by showing empathy, offering consistent support, and taking time to understand each student's unique needs and challenges (CASEL, 2023). Additionally, involving students in decisions that affect them, such as classroom rules or group projects, can increase their sense of agency and trust in their environment.

Using positive reinforcement: Recognize students for displaying trustworthiness and cooperation.

Restorative circles: Hold group discussions where students can share and resolve conflicts in a non-judgmental setting. Restorative practices focus on repairing harm and rebuilding trust after incidents of conflict. Rather than punitive measures, restorative approaches emphasize accountability, understanding, and restoring relationships. Restorative circles, conferences, and mediation sessions are methods that can be used to engage students in the process of healing after a conflict or violation of trust (Learning Policy Institute, 2021).

Safe spaces: Provide areas in the school where students can go to calm down when feeling overwhelmed. A physically safe school environment includes secure spaces free from bullying or violence, while an emotionally safe environment allows students to express themselves without fear of judgment (NCTSN, 2022).Educators can create this by encouraging inclusive practices, ensuring a non-threatening atmosphere, and addressing bullying and harassment immediately.
Active listening: Ensure that all students feel heard and validated, especially those who have experienced trauma. Active listening allows students to feel trust rooted in empathy. Listening and having their needs met. (NEA, n/d)

Professional Development for Teachers: Providing professional development for educators on trauma-informed practices, relationship-building, and trust-enhancing strategies ensures that staff are equipped to create a safe and supportive learning environment (Avery et al., 2020). This could include workshops on emotional intelligence, trauma awareness, and effective communication strategies.

In order to build a foundation of trust and safety for students, schools must prioritize safety and trust between teachers, administrators, and the entire school community. This foundation significantly impacts student outcomes, teacher effectiveness, and overall school culture. For educators, trust reduces professional stress, buffers against burnout, and increases job satisfaction. This is not simply anecdotal; research consistently shows that trust, particularly trust in students and colleagues, correlates with lower burnout levels and higher morale (Van Maele & Van Houtte, 2015).

In the early 2000s, a pivotal book was published by Anthony S. Bryk and Barbara Schnider titled, *Trust in Schools, A Core Resource for Improvement* (Bryk and Schnider, 2002). The book introduced the idea of relational trust. In a school setting, relational trust refers to the confidence that students, educators, families, and administrators have in one another's intentions, competence, and reliability, built through consistent, respectful, and ethical interactions over time. Research from *Trust in Schools* shows that schools with high relational trust among staff, students, and families are more likely to improve student achievement, successfully implement reforms, and maintain a positive school climate (Bryk and Schnider, 2002).

The research also demonstrated that when schools focus on teachers and administrators, relational trust becomes the foundation for a healthy school culture, effective decision-making, and successful implementation of educational initiatives. There are four core dimensions of relational trust that schools can examine as they focus on increasing safety and trust within the staff.

VS Case Study - PTSD:

A first-grade girl at Victory Schools developed PTSD symptoms after witnessing violence in her home. She often appeared anxious, startled easily by sudden noises, and withdrew from group activities. Victory teachers partnered with counseling services and introduced the character pillar of gratitude to support her healing. Through daily gratitude circles and reflective exercises, she learned to notice positive moments, such as kind gestures from classmates or fun classroom activities. Over time, this practice helped her shift focus from fear toward the good things happening around her. With consistent support, she became more engaged, smiling more often and forming close friendships. Today, gratitude continues to help her thrive, giving her strength to see hope beyond her trauma.

Relational trust in schools rests on four core dimensions:

Benevolence – Showing genuine care for the well-being of others.
Reliability – Following through on commitments and being consistent.
Competence – Demonstrating the skills and knowledge to fulfill your role well.
Integrity – Acting with honesty, fairness, and alignment to shared values.

When relational trust between teachers and administrators is high, the school climate reflects openness, respect, and shared purpose. Teachers feel safe expressing dissenting opinions without fear of retaliation, knowing their perspectives will be heard and valued. Administrators actively seek teacher input before making significant decisions, demonstrating respect for their professional expertise. Both parties assume good intentions and seek clarification before assigning blame, fostering a culture of understanding rather than defensiveness. Feedback flows in both directions, with leaders willing to receive as well as give constructive input. Even when disagreements arise, the focus remains on the issues at hand rather than personal attacks, ensuring that conflict becomes a pathway to growth rather than division (Byrk and Schnider, 2002).

Trust and safety play a critical role in building strong relationships within K-12 schools for students and staff. These elements not only foster character education but are also essential for trauma-informed practices that support emotional healing and growth. Schools must prioritize trust and safety as foundational principles, creating environments where students feel valued and empowered. Educators, administrators, and school communities must work together to ensure that all students, especially those who have experienced trauma, have the tools and support they need to thrive.

Relationships
Safety and trust lay critical groundwork in schools, but its relationships that bring school culture to life. In character education and trauma informed care, relationships are not an add-on, they are the foundation that supports trust, personal growth, and resilience. When students feel genuinely cared for, respected, and understood by their teachers, they are more willing to engage academically, take risks in their learning, and demonstrate prosocial behaviors (Mitchell, 2025). Strong, positive relationships with teachers create a sense of belonging for students.

Research shows that strong, stable, and nurturing relationships foster a sense of belonging, even more crucial for students who have experienced trauma, by creating the psychological safety necessary for healing and learning (Portell, 2019). Educators who demonstrate emotional regulation, empathy, and consistency model core values in action, offering students both stability and moral guidance. Additionally, these relationships show students how respect, responsibility, and fairness show up in daily interactions.
In a healthy school community, relationships extend across every level of connection, each playing a crucial role in shaping culture and supporting student growth.

The following connections form the foundation for trust, belonging, and shared responsibility, creating an environment where students and adults feel valued:

Teacher-to-Teacher Relationships - Strong teacher-to-teacher relationships are the backbone of a supportive and collaborative school culture. When educators trust and respect one another, they create a professional community where ideas, strategies, and challenges can be shared openly. This type of support reduces feelings of isolation, strengthens morale, and encourages consistent approaches to student learning and behavior. In trauma-informed schools, teacher collaboration is especially vital. It ensures that students experience predictable responses and shared values across classrooms. Ultimately, healthy relationships among teachers not only sustain staff well-being but also model cooperation and empathy for students.

Student-to-Administrator Relationships - Students thrive when they know their voices matter to school leaders. Approachable administrators who listen, support, and recognize students help cultivate a culture where young people feel valued and seen. This leadership connection reinforces a sense of safety and belonging across the school community.

Teacher-to-Administrator Relationships - Trust and mutual respect between teachers and administrators create unity, strengthen morale, and reduce burnout (Timms, et. al., 2008). When school leaders support and empower teachers, it fosters collective efficacy and a shared vision for student success. This partnership directly impacts the stability of the school environment and the ability to sustain trauma-informed practices.

Teacher-to-Family Relationships - Strong home-school connections ensure that character values and expectations are consistent between school and home. Teachers who collaborate with families build trust, extend emotional support, and reinforce students' learning in ways that increase stability. These relationships are especially critical for trauma-affected students, as they provide a network of support.

Curricula

Some schools approach character development and trauma-informed practices with specific curriculum in mind, based on community needs. When selecting any curriculum to support the integration of trauma-informed practices with character education, it's important to remember that these resources are supports to the work, not the work itself. The school's theory of action and guiding framework should drive decisions, ensuring that any curriculum is layered in thoughtfully based on the school's unique needs, readiness level, and vision.

For example, SEL programs such as Second Step, Caring School Community, RULER, PATHS, Conscious Discipline, and the 4Rs Program each bring research-based strategies that strengthen emotional literacy, relationship-building, and values-based decision-making. For instance:

- Second Step offers short, structured lessons that fit easily into daily routines;
- Caring School Community builds trust through class meetings and cross-age partnerships;
- RULER develops emotional intelligence using practical tools like the Mood Meter;
- PATHS teaches emotional literacy and impulse control through role-play and storytelling;
- The 4Rs Program integrates SEL into literacy instruction to connect emotions, values, and academic skills; and Conscious Discipline focuses on creating emotionally safe learning environments by combining self-regulation strategies with relationship-based discipline practices.

While each of these curricula can play an important role, the real transformation comes when they are strategically embedded into existing systems, aligned with the school's core values, and adapted to reflect the local context. This is where adopting tools like the DESSA (Devereux Student Strengths Assessment) and DECA (Devereux Early Childhood Assessment) can significantly strengthen the work. Both are research-based social-emotional assessments that measure protective factors linked to resilience, such as self-regulation, initiative, and attachment/relationships.

By using DESSA or DECA, schools can collect baseline data, track growth over time, and identify areas where students need targeted support. These assessments not only help educators personalize SEL instruction but also provide tangible evidence to evaluate the impact of trauma-informed and character education practices. In this way, SEL curricula, supported by robust assessment tools, become part of a cohesive, data-driven strategy, ensuring that the work is not just a set of activities, but a sustained cultural shift toward resilience, safety, and character development for all students.

What Does This All Look Like?: Developing a Plan

An example of a phased, multi-year plan that allows for deep learning, thoughtful system alignment, and sustainable implementation is provided below. Each school will approach this with their own needs in mind. Use this as an example for inspiration.

Year 1 – Build the Foundation and Pilot

The goal in this first stage is understanding and early wins. Begin by creating core values with a shared language and purpose across the school community, ensuring staff, leaders, and stakeholders understand *why* this work matters—not just in theory, but in practice. Use readiness assessments, such as the Trauma-Informed Schools Implementation Assessment (TIISA) or the PRIMED Character Education Self-Assessment, to establish a baseline for both trauma-informed and character education readiness. Introduce the DESSA (Devereux Student Strengths Assessment) and/or DECA (Devereux Early Childhood Assessment) to collect baseline data on students' social-emotional strengths and protective factors, such as self-regulation, initiative, and relationship skills. Form your Core Leadership Team and invest in their training so they can serve as internal champions and future trainers. Focus on relationships and building a trusting and safe environment. Pilot a few high-leverage strategies in select classrooms, such as daily morning meetings rooted in school core values, co-regulation techniques, and trauma-informed discipline alternatives while also using DESSA/DECA results to guide targeted student supports. Early data and visible changes build momentum before scaling.

Year 2 – Align and Integrate Systems

With foundational knowledge, baseline data, and proof points in place, focus on aligning existing systems: discipline, SEL curriculum, family engagement, and academic supports with trauma-informed and character education principles. Refine your theory in action and plan for measuring and monitoring progress. Replace or adapt policies that contradict the vision, ensuring that every system reinforces emotional safety, equity, and values-based learning. Embed explicit instruction in resilience skills (e.g., emotion regulation, empathy, problem-solving) into every grade level, informed by DESSA or DECA data to target areas of need. Expand professional development to reach all staff, ensuring consistent implementation across the school. Use aggregated DESSA/DECA results to identify trends, celebrate strengths, and address gaps at the schoolwide level. Strengthen home and school partnerships by offering family workshops that connect character development strategies to trauma-sensitive practices, reinforcing consistency between school and home.

Year 3 – Deepen, Expand, and Sustain

By the third year, the focus shifts to institutionalizing the work so it becomes part of the school's identity. Embed trauma-informed character education into hiring protocols, onboarding processes, and evaluation systems, ensuring new hires understand and commit to the approach from day one. Incorporate DESSA/DECA progress monitoring into ongoing student support cycles, using growth data to refine practices and celebrate success. Observation rubrics and administrator evaluations should include indicators for fostering trauma-sensitive, values-aligned environments. The goal is for the work to be self-sustaining, even amid leadership or staff turnover, because it is woven into the culture, systems, and daily routines.

At every stage, set clear, measurable goals so progress is visible and celebrated.

For example:

- "By March, 100% of staff will complete four hours of trauma-informed PD focused on emotional safety and character integration."
- "By November, self-regulation strategies will be explicitly taught and reinforced in every homeroom."
- "By year's end, DESSA composite scores in self-management will increase by 10% from baseline."
- "Office discipline referrals for relational conflicts will decrease by 25% from baseline."

Monitoring and Accountability

Monitor progress through multiple data sources: staff and student climate surveys, classroom walkthroughs, discipline and attendance data, and regular DESSA/DECA check-ins. Use this data to track fidelity of implementation and measure the impact on student outcomes. Celebrate progress by highlighting teacher and student success stories, sharing growth data with families, and recognizing milestones in newsletters, assemblies, or staff meetings.

Accountability in this model is not about compliance, it's about shared ownership. Leaders must model the values and practices they expect from staff, and the Core Leadership Team should serve as co-facilitators and thought partners, not just implementers. By blending readiness assessment, phased planning, data-driven goal setting, and celebration of progress, the shift to a trauma-informed, character education environment becomes less of a temporary initiative and more of a durable cultural identity, one capable of thriving through leadership changes, funding fluctuations, or shifting priorities.

The journey to becoming a trauma-informed, character education school environment is not a quick fix or a checklist to complete, it is a long-term cultural shift that redefines how a school understands, supports, and grows its students and staff. It begins with a shared "why" and a deep commitment to seeing the whole child, acknowledging the impact of lived experiences while intentionally nurturing character strengths and resilience. Along the way, it requires honest self-assessment, thoughtful planning, strategic use of resources, and a steadfast focus on building trust and connection. This work blends the science of trauma with the heart of character education, ensuring that safety, belonging, and values are not abstract ideals but lived realities in every interaction. By embedding these practices into policies, systems, and daily routines and by grounding them in both data and relationships, schools create an environment that can weather change, sustain progress, and empower every student to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. In the end, this is not just about improving outcomes; it's about transforming the very identity of a school into a community where compassion, integrity, and resilience are at the foundation.

Serving Through Classroom Connections

Introduction to this Section

Before serving students experiencing trauma, educators should be aware of contextual information related to each cause of trauma, as well as its potential impacts on students. Trauma, regardless of cause, is a life-changing event or circumstance that a child experiences as harmful physically or emotionally, which can have lasting negative effects on their ability to function mentally, physically, socially, and/or emotionally (SAMHSA, 2022). Traumatic events can be a single incident, or can occur in multiple settings across a lengthy time span, and they can be intentional or accidental (SAMHSA, 2022). The landmark CDC-Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study identified ten major categories of adversity that can occur before age eighteen, including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse; neglect; witnessing domestic violence; and living with household members who have untreated mental illness, substance use disorders, or who are incarcerated (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021).

Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) indicate that approximately one in five children in the United States has experienced at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE), such as abuse, neglect, parental substance use, household mental health challenges, or exposure to community violence. Trauma activates the body's 'natural alarm system', but chronic activation of this system has been shown to be disruptive both short-term and long-term to the development and functioning of all facets of life: making social and emotional connections, learning and cognitive development, and physical health outcomes (CDC, n.d.; Fox & Shonkoff, 2011; Mayo Clinic, 2023).

Trauma does not only arise from a single acute event; it can also result from chronic exposure to systemic and environmental stressors. Poverty, racism, food insecurity, unstable housing, and ongoing community violence are examples of persistent conditions that create toxic stress in children (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2021). These ongoing stressors can leave students in a continuous state of hypervigilance and emotional strain, contributing to increased rates of anxiety, depression, and difficulty concentrating in school. For instance, a student worried about housing stability or exposed to neighborhood violence may struggle to focus, regulate emotions, or engage with peers and adults.

Beyond direct experiences, trauma can also occur indirectly through vicarious or secondary exposure. Students may develop symptoms after witnessing distressing events in their communities, peer groups, or through media coverage. Events such as natural disasters, parental separation, or the sudden loss of a loved one can compound stress, particularly when multiple adversities occur in quick succession (Child Mind Institute, 2021; NCTSN, 2021). These experiences can trigger heightened anxiety, sadness, and a persistent sense of insecurity, affecting students' emotional and academic functioning.

The way a child reacts to a traumatic event depends on protective and risk factors that are personal to that child (Purvis, 2019). Protective factors help to mitigate damage from trauma, and can be friendships and peer support, experiencing success in school, stable caring relationships, feeling connected to others, having a sense of self-efficacy, and knowing how to handle behaviors and emotions (CDC, n.d.). Meanwhile, risk factors are associated with a less likely positive outcome, and include things like being disenfranchised from support networks, having few/no friends, and experiencing familial factors such as frequent conflict, isolation, low levels of supervision, corporal punishment, economic stress, poverty, violence, substance abuse, mental illness, incarceration, divorce, physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, and homelessness (CDC, n.d.). Thus, this chapter focuses on strategies to integrate within the school that may support students' needs. Trauma can result from a wide range of experiences that overwhelm a child's ability to feel safe, supported, and in control of their environment. Early adversities can alter the developing brain, affecting the prefrontal cortex and amygdala, which are regions critical for decision-making, emotional regulation, as well as threat response and potentially leading to long-term challenges with learning, self-control, and relationships (Harvard University Center on the Developing Child, 2021). Below, we will outline major areas of the effects of trauma on children.

Effects on Children

Social Impact

All children benefit from safe social connections, such as safe neighborhoods, education, healthcare, and social networks, and rely heavily on their parents to build and demonstrate those connections from an early age (Heineman, 2010; Preston et al, 2024). These protective factors, considered 'social determinants of health' are important community connections that when endangered, can lay the groundwork for social issues like child abuse (Kuhrau et al, 2023; Preston et al, 2024). These same children also struggle with attachment, finding it difficult to trust, regulate themselves emotionally, and develop appropriate and safe relationships (Attachment & Trauma Network, n.d.).

Emotional Impact

Attachment, which is the ability to form and maintain secure relationships, is an important protective factor for children, and difficulty with this area is common for children who have witnessed and experienced trauma (Attachment & Trauma Network, n.d.). Younger children with insecure attachments find it difficult to trust, struggle with emotional regulation, and have difficulty developing appropriate and safe relationships (Attachment & Trauma Network, n.d.). As adolescents, these children have learned to be either self-reliant, or reliant on peers rather than adults, who are often absent, unavailable, or unsafe (Heineman, 2010). From the perspective of attachment disorder, these children can be confusing and challenging to work with, having not learned to express their wants and needs in a manner that will get a positive response (Heineman, 2010). They can appear angry and needy at the same time, requesting help but turn away from any corresponding support (Heineman, 2010).

Trauma does more than disrupt a child's thoughts and feelings in the moment. It can profoundly influence how they view themselves and their place in the world. For many students, traumatic experiences leave lasting emotional scars that contribute to feelings of inadequacy, shame, and self-blame. Children may mistakenly believe they were responsible for the harm they endured, whether it involved abuse, neglect, bullying, or instability at home (Child Mind Institute, 2021). These distorted beliefs can become part of their core identity and affect how they interact with peers, respond to challenges, and perceive their potential.
The emotional effects of trauma can be profound and long-lasting, influencing how students navigate school, social relationships, and learning over time. Many children who have experienced trauma live in a persistent state of physiological arousal, a survival mechanism designed to detect and respond to threats. This heightened vigilance, often referred to as the "fight, flight, or freeze" response, keeps the nervous system on alert even in relatively safe environments (SAMHSA, 2014). In the classroom, this can appear as anxiety, irritability, sudden mood changes, or difficulty calming down after minor stressors. These behaviors are not simply discipline issues but reflect underlying changes in the brain's stress response systems.

Cognitive Impact

Trauma impacts more than a child's emotional well-being; it can fundamentally alter how the brain processes, stores, and applies information. Brain regions responsible for executive functioning, including the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus, are particularly sensitive. These areas govern essential skills such as working memory, attention regulation, planning, and problem-solving. Chronic stress, especially when it involves repeated or unresolved trauma, can disrupt the neural pathways connecting these regions, making it more difficult for the brain to efficiently process and recall new information (Harvard University Center on the Developing Child, 2021).

Exposure to circumstances that cause fear and anxiety, especially those that are chronic and ongoing, can lead to disruption in how children's brains develop, which can cause disruptions in every facet of their lives, from how they learn and function in society to interpersonal relationships (Fox & Shonkoff, 2011). According to research, children who experience chronic exposure to traumatic events can struggle with concentration and memory, the ability to organize and process information, impaired emotional regulation, impulse control, and executive functioning skills (NCTSN, 2008).

Repeated stress or exposure to adverse experiences can also affect cognitive performance by overactivating the body's stress response system, which increases stress hormones such as cortisol. This can interfere with both thinking and emotional processing (Cammack et al., 2022). For instance, a student who was once engaged and confident may begin forgetting assignments, missing deadlines, or zoning out during lessons. These changes are not the result of disinterest but reflect the brain operating in survival mode rather than learning mode.

Physical Impact

The effects of trauma extend beyond a child's mental and emotional state and can significantly impact physical health. Traumatic events activate a child's 'natural alarm system', which utilizes many hormones, including cortisol, to prepare the body to fight or flee (SAMHSA, 2022; Karen Purvis Institute, 2019; Mayo Clinic, 2023). Cortisol is our main stress hormone, and helps to shut down the less important short-term survival functions, such as our immune system, digestion, reproduction, and growth (Mayo Clinic, 2023).

Once the danger has passed, our body will naturally re-regulate and return healthy functioning to the hormones responsible for them, and cortisol will recede into the background again (Mayo Clinic, 2023). Research has found that children who are chronically exposed to traumatic events remain in fight or flight, and exhibit continuously elevated levels of cortisol, leading to digestive problems, headaches, muscle pain, weight gain, and over-reaction to noises/movements (Karen Purvis Institute, 2019; Mayo Clinic, 2023).

Research on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) shows that children exposed to persistent stress are more likely to develop chronic health problems that continue into adulthood. These conditions may include frequent headaches, recurring stomachaches, asthma, obesity, autoimmune disorders, and long-term illnesses such as cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021). The biological process underlying these outcomes often begins with prolonged activation of the body's stress response system. When stress hormones such as cortisol remain elevated for extended periods, the body experiences chronic inflammation, weakening the immune system and increasing vulnerability to both immediate and long-term health issues (Harvard University Center on the Developing Child, 2021).

Physical symptoms of stress often intertwine with academic and behavioral challenges. For example, a student experiencing chronic stomach pain or sleep deprivation may appear distracted, irritable, or disengaged in class. These behaviors are not indicators of low motivation but reflect the body under strain. Stress from adverse experiences can intensify these somatic responses, keeping the nervous system in a heightened state of alert and limiting opportunities for rest and recovery (CDC, 2023).

Academic Impact

Trauma's cumulative effects often create significant academic challenges that can be difficult for students to overcome without targeted support. Emotional distress, cognitive impairments, and ongoing physical health issues combine to undermine a student's ability to attend school regularly, stay engaged during lessons, and complete assignments on time. National data indicate that students who have experienced trauma are more likely to have higher absenteeism rates, face suspensions, repeat grades, and eventually drop out compared to peers without similar adverse experiences (NCES, 2022; Jenkins & Urbanski, 2019).

Even a single type of adversity, such as bullying victimization, can have clear academic consequences. The National Education Association reports that bullying significantly increases school

avoidance, reduces participation in classroom activities, and lowers motivation to succeed. Over time, this disengagement can lead to chronic absenteeism and falling behind academically, intensifying feelings of frustration and hopelessness (National Education Association, n.d.).

Trauma does not affect every student in the same way. For some, the impact is immediate and visible, such as failing grades or frequent outbursts. For others, the effects are more subtle such as quiet withdrawal from participation, incomplete work, or a slow decline in performance that might be mistaken for disinterest or laziness. Without understanding trauma's role, educators may unintentionally respond with punitive measures that further alienate students instead of addressing underlying issues. The sections in this chapter will provide background knowledge pertaining to causes of trauma and further expand on the specific impacts each cause might generate for students. Following, the sections will provide more specific resources and potential actionable strategies for schools.

Activities and Practical Approaches

Since trauma often stems from multiple overlapping sources, its effects vary widely among individuals. Cultural background, family dynamics, community context, and personal resilience all influence how a student experiences and responds to adversity. This variability underscores the importance of equity and cultural responsiveness in schools. Students from marginalized backgrounds may face compounded stressors related to discrimination or historical oppression, highlighting the need for environments where all students feel seen, understood, and supported (American School Counselor Association, 2023). Effective trauma-informed practices recognize each student's unique context, strengths, and vulnerabilities rather than applying a one-size-fits-all approach.

Activities and practical approaches when working with children who have experienced trauma from any cause should focus on building feelings of security, control, environmental predictability, and classroom community (Fox & Shonkoff, 2011). According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2022), two-thirds of children in the United States will have experienced at least one traumatic event by the time they reach the age of 16, which means in a classroom of 30 children, 20 could be dealing with the effects of trauma. Trauma-informed practices, while designed for people who have experienced trauma, can be good for all students (National Education Association, 2023).

We will provide some specific suggested classroom activities, but consider also the following research-based suggestions.

Creating a trauma-informed learning environment:

- Build positive relationships with your students
- Establish and maintain classroom routines and rituals
- Allow children to have choices
- Increase support and encouragement
- Establish clear boundaries and logical consequences that are restorative rather than punishment-based
- Pay attention to antecedents and triggers - analyze the environment
- Warn children before making environmental changes to things like lights and noise levels (Attachment & Trauma Network, n.d.; NCTSN, 2008; NEA, 2023)
- Predictability and consistency reduce anxiety
- Relational safety: genuine warmth, active listening, and consistent follow-through builds trust
- Empowerment through choice (even small academic or behavioral choices) restores autonomy often stripped by unstable environments (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018)
- When adults create conditions of safety and belonging, students shift from survival mode to an engaged, learning-ready state (Souers & Hall, 2016)

Integrating One-on-One Connections:

Predictable Check-Ins

Students who experience instability need predictability from caring adults. A simple two-minute positive interaction, such as a morning greeting, an after-school chat, or a consistent acknowledgment can build trust over time (Souers & Hall, 2016). For example, a teacher might say, *"I'm glad you're here today. I'm excited to see what you'll do in math today."*

Emotional Regulation Modeling and Coaching

Children living in poverty often lack models for healthy emotion regulation (Blair & Raver, 2016). Using emotion coaching or naming the feeling, validating it, and guiding the student to regulation, helps rewire their stress responses. A teacher might calmly say, *"You seem frustrated. That makes sense. Let's take a deep breath together, and then we can solve this problem."*

Strength Spotting

Students can benefit from adults who intentionally notice their strengths. Highlighting small successes, such as, "*I saw how hard you tried on that math problem, even when it was tough"* can build self-efficacy and counter negative self-perceptions (Evans & Kim, 2013).

Group Strategies:

Community Circles

Regular class meetings or restorative circles create shared rituals of belonging and peer empathy. These gatherings can include simple prompts like, *"Share one thing you're grateful for today"* or *"What's a challenge you overcame this week?"* When students feel heard in a group, it reduces isolation and fosters connectedness (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015).

Co-Regulation Activities

Students impacted by trauma benefit from group regulation practices that calm the nervous system. Brain breaks with movement, breathing exercises, or mindfulness activities help shift students from survival mode to a learning-ready state (Porges, 2011).

Peer Buddy Systems

Pairing students with a "learning buddy" builds belonging and social support. For children with limited social skills, having structured peer interaction fosters collaboration and models conflict resolution.

Cross-Age Buddy Systems

Pairing younger students with older students for reading, projects, or recess support helps build a sense of community and belonging schoolwide. Younger students gain nurturing relationships and role models, while older students build empathy, leadership, and responsibility (Souers & Hall, 2016). Cross-age buddies can also help normalize help-seeking, strengthen peer connections, and reduce social isolation.

Grade-Level Specific Approaches:

PreK–2: Early Childhood and Primary Grades

- Establish highly predictable routines and visual schedules so children know what to expect. Predictability reduces anxiety for those from unstable environments.
- Create calm corners or sensory spaces where students can self-regulate before rejoining the group.
- Read aloud books about belonging, kindness, and resilience, such as *Last Stop on Market Street* (de la Peña) or *Those Shoes* (Boelts).

Grades 3–5: Upper Elementary

- Teach explicit SEL skills, including emotion vocabulary, perspective-taking, and conflict resolution, through programs like *Zones of Regulation*.
- Use project-based learning that connects to real-life experiences, validating students' cultural backgrounds and strengths.
- Scaffold organizational skills with checklists and step-by-step supports for independent work.

Grades 6–8: Middle School

- Normalize help-seeking behaviors by embedding structured mentorships, advisory groups, or peer leaders.
- Incorporate identity-affirming curriculum with culturally responsive literature and discussions about inequity and resilience.
- Provide structured opportunities for leadership—allowing students to help plan events, tutor younger students, or lead classroom routines—which builds agency and self-worth.

Finally, as an educator be aware of your own trauma, and the lens through which you view behavior.

Where to Get Additional Support

Reflective Activity

Which of the following are you currently practicing regularly or what might you work to integrate?

- Practice the mindset of compassion, which means assuming a behavior is trauma-based rather than intentional; Karyn Purvis (2019), describes this as 'seeing the need behind the behavior'.
- Practice a growth-mindset through the use of positive and specific feedback, and model this regulation with your own behavior and choices as well (NEA, 2023).
- Take care of yourself; compassion fatigue is a very real occupational hazard, and if you find yourself withdrawing from friends or family, feeling unusually irritable, unable to focus, feeling hopeless, not sleeping, or persistently worrying about your students, it's time to reach out for support (NEA, 2023; NCTSN, 2008)

Supporting students experiencing trauma requires a multi-layered network of school, family, and community resources.

Educators can consider:

- School-based teams, including counselors, social workers, and MTSS teams, to provide wraparound services for both academic and social-emotional needs.
- Local community organizations, such as food banks, housing assistance programs, and healthcare agencies, to meet basic needs.
- Professional learning through trauma-informed care organizations like the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), CASEL for SEL integration, and Harvard's Center on the Developing Child.
- Professional books like *Fostering Resilient Learners* (Souers & Hall, 2016), *Help for Billy* (Forbes, 2012), and *Lost at School* (Greene, 2014) offer accessible strategies for teachers seeking to integrate trauma-sensitive practices into daily instruction.
- NCTSN, Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators: https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//child_trauma_toolkit_educators.pdf
- American Red Cross Resource Directory: https://www.redcross.org/get-help/resources.html
- The Child Welfare Information Gateway, What is Child Abuse and Neglect? Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms: https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/what-child-abuse-and-neglect-recognizing-signs-and-symptoms/
- The 6 Stages of Grooming Fact Sheet The 6 Stages of Grooming

Bullying and Cyberbullying

Bullying is a serious and widespread problem in schools that harms students' physical health, emotional well-being, and overall sense of safety. Unlike typical peer conflicts, bullying involves the deliberate and repeated misuse of power to intimidate, harm, or exclude another student (StopBullying.gov, 2024). It can take many forms, such as physical aggression, verbal harassment, and social exclusion. In recent years, bullying has increasingly moved into the digital world through cyberbullying, which includes harmful behaviors spread via social media, texting, and other online platforms (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2023).

Recent national data reveal that nearly one in five students aged 12 to 18 reported being bullied at school during the 2021-2022 school year. Among those students, about one in five experienced bullying online or through text messages (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2024). Middle school students report the highest rates of bullying, and students who identify as LGBTQ+ experience bullying at nearly twice the rate of their peers (CDC, 2023).

VS Case Study - Bullying

A seventh-grade girl at Victory Schools faced ongoing cyberbullying from peers, which left her withdrawn and fearful of speaking up in class. The trauma caused her to question her self-worth and avoid group interactions. Victory teachers introduced the character pillar of courage, encouraging her to take small, brave steps each day. With teacher support, she practiced raising her hand once per class, sharing her perspective, and reporting negative behavior instead of remaining silent. Each success built her confidence, and her courage began to inspire others who had witnessed the bullying. Over time, she regained her voice and became a stronger participant in both academics and extracurricular activities.
By the end of the school year, she demonstrated that courage could transform fear into empowerment, showing resilience in the face of adversity.

The emotional impact of bullying is profound. Students who are bullied are almost twice as likely to struggle with anxiety and depression compared to their non victimized peers (CDC, 2023). A large study involving over 95,000 students found that even mild bullying increases the risk of mental health issues like trauma symptoms and poor sleep, while severe bullying greatly amplifies these risks (Zhao et al., 2023).

Cyberbullying is especially concerning because it extends beyond school hours and invades students' personal lives, leaving many without a safe space for relief (StopBullying.gov, 2024). Students who spend more time on social media are more likely to face bullying and are at greater risk for feelings of sadness, hopelessness, and suicidal thoughts (CDC, 2023). These findings show that bullying is far more than an isolated conflict. It is a complex issue that damages mental health, disrupts academic engagement, and erodes trust within school communities (CDC, 2019; StopBullying.gov, 2019).

Bullying affects not only the direct victims but also bystanders and even the perpetrators themselves. This contributes to a hostile school climate that undermines students' sense of safety and belonging (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], n.d.a). Exposure to bullying-related trauma can interfere with students' ability to focus, learn, and maintain healthy peer relationships, compounding both academic and social challenges (NCTSN, n.d.a).

Educators, counselors, and school leaders play a crucial role in addressing bullying proactively. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014) emphasizes the importance of integrating trauma-informed principles such as safety, trustworthiness, empowerment, and peer support into school culture to prevent harm, promote healing, and boost student engagement.

Bullying reflects deeper social and emotional challenges within school communities, and reactive discipline alone cannot solve these systemic problems. Lasting prevention and healing require cultivating a proactive, values driven culture that emphasizes safety, belonging, and mutual respect. Trauma informed practices lay the groundwork for such a culture by creating predictable, supportive environments where students feel secure and empowered to learn (National Education Association, n.d.; National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2021).

When trauma informed approaches are combined with intentional character education, schools can address the root causes of harmful behaviors. Lessons and daily modeling of empathy, fairness, responsibility, and courage help students internalize prosocial values that directly counteract bullying (StopBullying.gov, 2024). In classrooms where moral development is woven into academics and peer interactions, students build stronger resilience and self-awareness while contributing to a healthier, more inclusive school climate (NCTSN, 2022; National Education Association, n.d.). This integrated approach reduces aggression, strengthens relationships, and supports recovery from the emotional effects of bullying, all while preventing future harm.

VS Case Study - Bullying

A first-grade student began the school year withdrawn and hesitant to participate in class after experiencing repeated bullying in kindergarten. The child often sat alone at recess and became easily frustrated when faced with even small academic challenges. Victory teachers noticed these behaviors and introduced the student to the school's character education program, focusing on the pillar of perseverance. Through guided classroom discussions and role-play activities, the student learned that perseverance meant not giving up, even when things were difficult. With support from Victory teachers, the student set small goals, like raising a hand once a day and joining a group game at recess. At first, the student struggled and worried about being rejected by peers. However, the program's emphasis on celebrating effort helped build confidence each time an attempt was made. Over time, friendships began to form, and the student showed greater resilience when faced with setbacks. By the end of the semester, Victory Schools staff and parents noticed a brighter, more determined child who was no longer defined by past bullying experiences, but by the ability to persevere and grow stronger.

Causes of Trauma: Understanding Bullying and Cyberbullying

Bullying and cyberbullying cause profound trauma because they are repeated and targeted behaviors rooted in unequal power dynamics. Victims often endure sustained humiliation, threats, or exclusion that leave them feeling powerless and isolated (Zhao et al., 2023). Cyberbullying makes this trauma worse by adding anonymity, the permanence of harmful content, and wider exposure, which increases fear and vulnerability (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2019).
When harmful messages or images follow students into their homes and personal devices, it becomes impossible for them to find refuge (StopBullying.gov, 2019). This constant intrusion creates a deep sense of insecurity in both physical and virtual environments (Zhao et al., 2023). Schools that recognize trauma symptoms early can support recovery through counseling, restorative practices, and trauma sensitive routines. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014) highlights that trauma informed frameworks focus on empathy, empowerment, and predictability, which are essential for creating healing environments.

Character education plays an important role alongside trauma informed practices in addressing the harm caused by bullying. By intentionally developing traits such as empathy, fairness, responsibility, and courage, schools encourage prosocial behavior and moral resilience. Research involving children's literature and structured activities shows that even young learners can identify bullying behaviors and build prevention strategies through character focused learning (Freeman, 2014).

When combined with trauma informed systems, this character focused approach strengthens prevention and recovery efforts. Schools that align routines with core values of safety, trust, and empowerment support caring relationships, reduce conflict, and improve emotional well-being (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2021; SchoolSafety.gov, 2024). Together, character education and trauma sensitive practices provide a strong foundation for building resilience, improving peer relationships, and helping students heal from and resist the effects of bullying.

Effects on Children

Social Impact

Bullying and cyberbullying often lead to a deep sense of social disconnection. Students who are repeatedly targeted tend to withdraw from friendships and social activities as a way to protect themselves from further harm. Educators may sometimes mistake this withdrawal for antisocial or disengaged behavior, when in fact it is often a survival response to ongoing trauma (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], n.d.a). When bullying happens online, this isolation can feel even more intense. Students may worry that humiliating messages or images will continue to spread beyond the school day, leaving them anxious even in the safety of their own homes (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2019; StopBullying.gov, 2019).Experiencing ongoing aggression can also lead to harmful internal coping patterns. Many students shut down emotionally or develop a critical inner voice that encourages self-blame and feelings of unworthiness (Zhao et al., 2023).

VS Case Study - Bullying

A tenth-grade boy at Victory Schools carried deep frustration and anger after being targeted by bullying, leading to conflicts with both peers and teachers. He often responded defensively, creating further isolation. Victory teachers helped him focus on the character pillar of compassion, guiding him to understand both his own pain and the importance of showing kindness to others. Through peer mentoring activities and reflective journaling, he began to see that compassion could break the cycle of negativity. He practiced offering support to classmates who also felt excluded, and this helped rebuild his own sense of belonging. Over time, compassion replaced anger as his default response, improving relationships across the campus. By the end of the year, he was recognized as a positive leader, modeling how compassion can heal both personal wounds and the school community.

As an educator, you might notice a student who was once actively involved in class now sitting quietly and avoiding eye contact. You may see them stop interacting with peers and hear them say things like "nobody wants me around." In these moments, the most important thing is to create a calm and safe space where the student feels heard without judgment. Sitting down with them one-on-one, you can acknowledge their pain, affirm that their experiences matter, and reassure them that they are not alone. From there, you can gently guide them toward safe and supportive peer interactions, perhaps by pairing them with a trusted classmate for a collaborative project or inviting them to join a small group activity focused on teamwork and kindness.

Character education, when taught intentionally and consistently, provides vital support for students working through the trauma of bullying. Educators who model and reinforce values such as empathy, fairness, courage, and responsibility help students rebuild trust in themselves and others. Lessons might include reflecting on personal strengths, discussing literary characters who face challenges with integrity, or engaging in group activities centered on kind actions. Over time, these experiences build students' moral resilience and demonstrate that positive relationships are possible even after experiencing harm.

Trauma informed practices increase the impact of character education by making sure school routines and policies prioritize safety, belonging, and predictability. In trauma sensitive classrooms, schools move away from punitive discipline toward restorative conversations that focus on accountability, empathy, and healing. When restorative practices align with lessons about respect and responsibility, they help students reconnect with peers and renew a positive school culture. According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, trauma informed frameworks support caring peer relationships and promote emotional well-being throughout the school community (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2021). Likewise, the SchoolSafety.gov toolkit outlines whole school strategies that integrate character based values into trauma aware systems, encouraging empathy, fairness, and empowerment to support students' moral and emotional growth (SchoolSafety.gov, 2024).

Recent studies also show that nurturing specific character strengths like gratitude and forgiveness can inspire bystanders to act with compassion. When students learn these traits, they are more likely to support peers in distress, which reduces the victim's feelings of isolation and helps create a culture of care within the classroom community (García-Vázquez et al., 2020). For an educator, this means that every lesson on kindness or fairness has the potential to spread beyond individual students and reshape the peer culture as a whole.

Emotional Impact

Bullying and cyberbullying often cause deep emotional pain that lasts long after the immediate incident. Victims commonly experience anxiety, depression, irritability, and emotional detachment, which are all symptoms that resemble chronic relational trauma (Zhao et al., 2023). Cyberbullying makes these feelings worse because it follows students into their personal spaces through phones and social media, leaving them with no safe place to escape harassment (Garcia and Godoy, 2021). The ongoing stress from these experiences can cause students to lose confidence and develop a negative view of themselves, which increases their sense of helplessness.

Trauma informed schools work to counter these patterns by focusing intentionally on safety, empowerment, and predictability. Educators can create safe zones in the classroom where students can practice self regulation and express their emotions. Regular check-ins, restorative circles, and peer support groups provide students with spaces to share their feelings and know they are not alone. When paired with character education, these practices deepen healing. Lessons that focus on empathy, kindness, gratitude, and forgiveness teach students how to understand and manage their emotions while building resilience. For example, keeping a gratitude journal or participating in a kindness challenge can help students shift their attention from negative thoughts to recognizing moments of connection and support. Research shows that practicing gratitude and empathy in the classroom reduces anxiety and improves emotional regulation skills (Garcia and Godoy, 2021).

As an educator, you might meet privately with a student who has withdrawn because of bullying and start with a calm conversation that validates their feelings by saying something like, "I can see how hard this has been for you, and I want you to know you are not alone." From there, you could introduce a simple daily check-in routine, such as asking the student to rate their emotions on a color chart. Over time, you can gradually invite the student to join a peer support circle focused on building empathy and connection. Alongside these supports, you can include a weekly character education activity, such as reflecting on a story where a character shows courage and kindness. This helps the student understand that their pain does not define their worth and that they are capable of resilience and growth.

Cognitive Impact

Ongoing bullying and cyberbullying create chronic stress that disrupts the cognitive abilities students need to learn effectively, such as attention, memory, and flexible thinking. When young people feel unsafe, their brains shift into a survival mode that makes it harder to focus, process information, and stay engaged with new learning challenges. Over time, this stress weakens executive functions like planning, working memory, and self regulation, all of which are critical for academic success. As a result, students who previously performed well may begin to lose concentration, become forgetful, or disengage from classwork because of the lasting effects of stress on brain and emotional functioning (Cammack et al., 2022).

Research in developmental neuroscience shows that stress from bullying disrupts neuroendocrine and emotional systems in ways that impair decision making, cognitive flexibility, and learning. This highlights how deeply bullying affects both the mind and academic performance (Cammack et al., 2022).

Trauma informed strategies help stabilize these cognitive disruptions. Predictable classroom routines, brain breaks, and calm down corners reduce the cognitive load caused by stress. Embedding social emotional learning that teaches self awareness and self management supports students in regaining focus. When these trauma sensitive routines are combined with character education, students connect cognitive skills to moral development. For example, a lesson on perseverance and problem solving shows students they can choose constructive responses even in difficult moments. Research on integrating social emotional learning and character education shows significant improvements in both cognitive engagement and emotional resilience (Durlak et al., 2022).

If a student is unable to focus after experiencing bullying, an educator might begin class with a brief mindfulness practice to calm the student's nervous system and create a greater sense of safety. After this, the teacher could lead a short reflective discussion on the value of perseverance, encouraging students to share examples of times they worked through challenges. This type of practice helps build cognitive stamina while also linking academic effort to moral growth and resilience.

Physical Impact

Chronic bullying and cyberbullying place students under toxic stress that harms their physical health. This ongoing stress can raise cortisol levels, disrupt sleep patterns, weaken the immune system, and cause symptoms like headaches, stomachaches, fatigue, and poor appetite. These physical symptoms often lead to increased absences and lower participation in school activities, creating a cycle that further limits academic and social engagement (IDRA, 2024).

Trauma informed schools respond with wellness routines that support both physical and emotional regulation. Simple practices such as movement breaks, breathing exercises, and calming corners help reset the body's stress response. Character education supports these efforts by teaching respect for one's body, empathy for others, and personal responsibility for well-being. Over time, these lessons reinforce the idea that caring for one's health is both a moral and social responsibility.

As an educator, you might notice a student frequently complaining of stomachaches and fatigue. Rather than dismissing these concerns as avoidance, you can acknowledge the connection between stress and physical symptoms. To support the student, you could introduce a daily movement break for the whole class and model self-care by saying, "Taking a moment to breathe and move helps our bodies feel safe and ready to learn." At the same time, character lessons on self respect and kindness toward oneself can be included, helping students understand that caring for their physical and emotional well-being is an important part of being a responsible member of the school community.

Personal Impact

Bullying and cyberbullying can deeply damage how young people see themselves. Many victims start to internalize negative messages, feeling unworthy and disconnected from their peers. When cyberbullying happens, its permanent and public nature can make this damage worse, making it harder for students to trust others or feel safe in their own identity. Research shows that bullying victimization, both in person and online, is strongly linked to lower self-esteem in adolescents. Factors such as how young people perceive time can influence how much their self-esteem is affected (Moon and Mello, 2021).

Educators and counselors can help repair identity through affirming relationships and restorative practices. Trauma-informed approaches focus on consistency and cultural responsiveness, while character education offers a framework for students to rebuild self respect, empathy, and courage. Lessons on responsibility, moral agency, and resilience give students tools to reconstruct their sense of self. They learn that they are not defined by their victimization but by their actions, values, and the supportive relationships they choose to build. For example, if a student describes themselves as "a nobody," you can start by sincerely highlighting their strengths in front of the class, such as praising their creativity or perseverance on an assignment. In one-on-one conversations, you can gently guide them through a character reflection exercise by asking, "What are two things you value about yourself?" Over time, this helps the student reframe their identity around positive traits instead of trauma.

Academic Impact

Bullying has a significant impact on students' academic achievement, often leading to lower grades, chronic absenteeism, and an increased risk of dropping out of school. The persistent fear and anxiety caused by bullying create barriers to engagement, disrupting focus and overall learning. Reports show that students who experience bullying and cyberbullying are more likely to avoid school and face long-term academic decline (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2022). In severe cases, the ongoing stress and loss of connection to school can lead students to leave education altogether, highlighting a strong link between bullying and school dropout (Jenkins & Urbanski, 2019).

Trauma informed strategies such as social emotional learning, positive behavioral interventions and supports, and restorative justice improve school climate and help students re-engage with learning (Durlak et al., 2022). When combined with character education themes like fairness, integrity, and perseverance, these approaches not only reduce behavioral issues but also promote positive relationships between teachers and students. Research shows that when restorative practices are carefully integrated into trauma informed systems, character education efforts help build trust, strengthen community connections, and improve academic engagement across schools (Character.org, 2021).

For example, if a student begins missing classes or struggling to complete work because of bullying, you might coordinate a restorative conversation with the student and supportive peers to help them feel seen and heard. You could then adjust assignments temporarily to reduce overwhelm while including class discussions about responsibility and courage. This approach helps the student regain academic momentum while feeling morally supported by the community.

Where to Get Additional Support

Effective bullying and cyberbullying prevention and intervention require strong collaboration between schools, families, mental health providers, and community organizations. Educators, school counselors, and social workers often serve as the first responders when a student is affected by bullying, so it is critical that they are familiar with credible, research based resources. Authoritative organizations such as StopBullying.gov, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration provide free prevention toolkits, trauma informed practice guides, and response models designed specifically for schools (CDC, 2019; StopBullying.gov, 2019; NCTSN, 2021; SAMHSA, 2014).

Schools can increase their support capacity by partnering with local mental health agencies and school linked services. These partnerships improve access to specialized interventions such as trauma informed cognitive behavioral therapy, group counseling, and family based supports. Coordinating these services works best when referral pathways are clearly communicated, culturally responsive, and free of stigma to encourage families to seek help (SchoolSafety.gov, 2024; ASCA, 2023).

Character education can also be integrated within these support networks. Peer leadership groups that promote empathy, kindness, and moral courage can work alongside professional counseling services to create a comprehensive support system. Research shows that when character strengths such as gratitude and forgiveness are intentionally developed, peer cultures shift toward greater inclusion and bystander intervention, reducing isolation for victims (García-Vázquez et al., 2020).

Educators who collaborate with families and community organizations can greatly extend the reach of character education and trauma informed practices. Many districts connect families to free community programs that teach healthy relationships, online safety, and digital citizenship, helping to reinforce lessons about empathy, respect, kindness, and responsibility in home environments (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023). In addition, trauma informed schools implement clear referral systems and communication tools that support families in accessing needed services. Providing multilingual guides, peer support circles, helplines, and access to mental health networks helps reduce bullying incidents and improves student well-being (SchoolSafety.gov, 2024). With these supports, families receive clear, culturally relevant information on how to help their children while schools embed values like empathy, respect, courage, and digital responsibility into prevention and intervention efforts. Peer leadership groups also reinforce positive behaviors among students, fostering both recovery and resilience. Together, these approaches create a safer and more supportive school climate that reduces bullying and promotes inclusion.

Professional development for staff is essential to sustain these efforts. Teachers and counselors benefit from ongoing training on trauma informed approaches, bullying prevention, and the integration of social emotional learning and character education in their classrooms. The American School Counselor Association highlights the importance of equipping educators with skills to recognize trauma symptoms early and respond with compassion instead of relying on punitive measures (ASCA, 2023).

Reflection and Next Steps

School leaders and educators are encouraged to reflect critically on their current bullying prevention and trauma-informed practices. These guiding questions can support dialogue and action planning:

- How does our school integrate trauma-informed principles into bullying and cyberbullying prevention and response efforts?
- In what ways do we ensure students feel safe and supported by trusted adults when facing bullying or cyberbullying?
- How culturally responsive and inclusive are our interventions for students affected by bullying?
- What training and resources do we provide staff to recognize trauma and effectively respond to bullying incidents?
- How are students involved in creating a positive, respectful school culture that discourages bullying?
- Additional questions related to character education can help schools strengthen the moral and social-emotional foundation that prevents bullying in the first place:
- How does our curriculum intentionally teach and reinforce character traits such as empathy, kindness, courage, and fairness?
- Are students given opportunities to practice moral decision-making in real-life scenarios, such as peer mediation, service-learning projects, or restorative justice circles?
- Do we recognize and celebrate acts of kindness, respect, and inclusion in meaningful ways to model positive behavior for all students?
- How do we integrate digital citizenship and ethical online behavior into our character education efforts to address cyberbullying?
- In what ways do we actively engage families and community members to reinforce character development beyond the classroom?
- Are peer leadership or mentoring programs in place to empower students as role models and advocates for a respectful school culture?
- How do we measure the impact of character education on student relationships, school climate, and overall well-being?

Activity K-2: "Be a Bucket Filler"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Teach students how kind actions "fill" buckets and unkind actions "dip" from them.	Compassion, Friendship, Responsibility	Encourages prosocial behavior and emotional regulation in a group setting.	Grades K-2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL Competency: Social Awareness, Relationship Skills American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SMS 2: Demonstrate self-discipline and self-control	Students participate in groups and can explain one way to "fill a bucket." Students correctly categorize behaviors as helpful or hurtful.	paper buckets pom-poms/stickers scenario cards	Group (4–6 students)

Steps:

1. Introduce the invisible "bucket" metaphor.

Explain the concept:

"Imagine everyone has an invisible bucket. This bucket holds your feelings. When your bucket is full, you feel happy, proud, and safe. When your bucket is empty, you feel sad, lonely, or mad."

Show examples:

- "When someone shares a toy with you, and shows friendship, it fills your bucket."
- "When someone says something mean, it takes water out of your bucket."

Discussion Prompts

1. Understanding the metaphor
   - "What do you think it means when your bucket is full?"
   - "How do you feel when someone fills your bucket?"
   - "What happens when someone empties your bucket?"
2. Identifying bucket fillers
   - "What are some things we can do to fill someone's bucket and show compassion?"
   - "Can words fill a bucket too? What words?"
   - "Can actions fill a bucket? What actions?"
3. Identifying bucket dippers
   - "What are some ways someone might empty a bucket?"
   - "How do you feel when your bucket is emptied?"
   - "How can we stop emptying someone else's bucket?"
4. Reflection and personal connection
   - "Can you think of a time someone was responsible for filling your bucket?"
   - "Can you think of a time when you were responsible for filling someone else's bucket?"

2. Read aloud scenarios and have students add/remove items from buckets.

Sample Scenarios:

Bucket-Filling Scenarios (add items to bucket):

A friend shares their crayons with you.
- Someone says, "Good job!" after you finish a puzzle.
- You help a classmate clean up a spill.
- A friend invites you to play a game during recess.
- Someone smiles and says hello in the morning.
- You say, "Thank you!" when someone helps you.

Bucket-Dipping Scenarios (remove items from bucket):

- Someone calls another student a mean name.
- A friend takes your toy without asking.
- A classmate refuses to let you join a game.
- Someone laughs at a mistake you made.
- A friend interrupts or ignores you on purpose.
- You accidentally hurt someone's feelings by not listening.

Additional Activity

- Introduce the buckets:
  * Show two bucket visuals (one for "fill," one for "dip").
- Read a scenario aloud:
  * Ask students: "Does this fill a bucket or dip a bucket?"
- Add/Remove items:
  * Use tokens, sticky notes, or drawn objects to represent each behavior and place them in the appropriate bucket.
- Discussion Questions:
  * How does it feel when your bucket is full?"
  * How can we help someone whose bucket has been dipped?"
  * What could you do in that scenario to be a bucket filler?"

3. Wrap-Up Ideas

- Reflection:
  Ask each student to share one action they will do today to fill someone's bucket.
- Creative Expression:
  Students can draw their own bucket and write/draw ways to fill it.
- Group Commitment:
  Make a classroom "Bucket Filler Pledge" where everyone promises to use kind words and actions.
- Story Connection:
  Read a book like Have You Filled a Bucket Today? and discuss characters' actions in terms of filling or dipping buckets.
- Review & Reinforce:
  End the session by reviewing the buckets and discussing:
  - "Which bucket actions will we remember to do today?"
  - "How can we notice when someone else's bucket needs filling?"

Closing:

Reflect on ways to be kind, compassionate, and responsible at home. Extension: Create a classroom "bucket filler wall."

Handouts:

"Be a Bucket Filler"

Activity K-2: "Kindness Catcher"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Help students identify kind vs. unkind behaviors and practice expressing themselves when someone is not kind to them.	Kindness, Respect, Empathy	Creates emotional safety through a supportive 1:1 environment; validates student experiences.	Grades K–2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success M3: Sense of belonging B-SS 2: Create positive relationships with peers	Students identify examples of kind and unkind behavior. Students can verbalize a basic response to unkind behavior (e.g., "Please stop").	Printable "Kindness Catcher" Crayons	Individual

Steps:

1. Review what bullying looks like in kid-friendly terms (e.g., repeated meanness).

Book Recommendations to help start conversations on the topic as well as kindness, respect, and empathy.

- "The Juice Box Bully" by Bob Sornson & Maria Dismondy
  Teaches kids about responding to bullying in positive ways and being kind.
- "Stand Up and Speak Out!"by Melissa Higgins
  Simple scenarios showing kids how to handle bullying and be an upstander.
- "Chrysanthemum" by Kevin Henkes
  Focuses on empathy, teasing, and the importance of kindness.

2. Use the 'Kindness Catcher' handout to play through scenarios like "Someone won't let me play" or "A friend shared with me."

3. For each, ask: "How did that make you feel? What could you do or say? How can you show kindness, respect, or empathy?"

Closing:

Teach a simple "I-message."

Extension: Use a take-home "Kindness Challenge" with parent involvement.

Handouts:

My Kindness Catcher

Kindness Challenge

Teaching I-Messages

Activity 3-5: "Stop, Walk, Talk Toolkit"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Build skills to recognize bullying, assertively respond, and seek help from trusted adults.	Courage, Self-Advocacy, Trust	Provides voice and choice; fosters student-adult trust.	Grades 3-5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SS 9: Demonstrate social maturity Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Responsible Decision-Making	Students correctly identify bullying behavior. Student practices using "Stop, Walk, Talk" in a scenario.	Toolkit card Safe People worksheet	Individual

Steps:

1. Review what bullying is.

Bullying is:

* When someone repeatedly hurts, teases, or leaves someone out on purpose.
* It can be physical (hitting, pushing), verbal (name-calling, teasing), or social (excluding, spreading rumors).
* It is intentional and happens more than once.

- Key Points to Emphasize:

*Bullying is different from a one-time argument or accident.
*Everyone deserves to feel safe and respected at school and online.
*Recommended Books to help portray definitions/start conversations surrounding courage, self-advocacy and trust :

1. The Juice Box Bully by Bob Sornson & Maria Dismondy – teaches children positive ways to respond to bullying.
2. Stand Up and Speak Out! by Melissa Higgins – provides kid-friendly scenarios about standing up to bullying.
3. Chrysanthemum by Kevin Henkes – emphasizes kindness and empathy in peer interactions.

2. Teach "Stop, Walk, Talk" response using the 'Stop, Talk, Walk Toolkit' handout.

3. Practice with 1–2 student-chosen scenarios. Scenarios can be generated from the "Stop, Walk, Talk" handout. Here are some examples:

STOP

- A classmate is pushing you in line repeatedly.
- Someone calls you a mean nickname during recess.
- A peer teases you about your lunch or clothing.
- A friend keeps posting silly or hurtful pictures of you online.
- A student is taking your things without asking.

Student Action Example:
"Stop! I don't like that," said in a firm but respectful voice.

WALK

- The teasing continues after you say stop.
- A group of students is trying to make you join in something you don't want to do.
- Someone is following you around and bothering you.

Student Action Example:

Walk away calmly to a safe area, like the classroom, library, or near a teacher/adult.
Join friends who are supportive and safe.

TALK

- A student keeps sending hurtful messages online after you asked them to stop.
- You see someone being bullied and want to help.
- You feel unsafe because someone is spreading rumors about you or others.

Student Action Example:

Demonstrate courage, self-advocacy and trust by telling a trusted adult (teacher, counselor, parent) exactly what happened.
Explain the situation clearly, including who, what, when, and where.

Closing:

Create a "trusted adult" wallet card or use the "Safe People Worksheet."
Extension: Student completes a "bully-proof goal" journal prompt.

Handouts:

Stop, Talk, Walk Toolkit

"Safe People" Worksheet

Activity 3-5: "Upstander Squad"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Empower students to act against bullying and support others safely.	Integrity, Advocacy, Empathy	Promotes belonging and peer collaboration.	Grades 3-5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Social Awareness, Relationship Skills American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA M5: Belief in achieving high-quality results	Group identifies bullying and upstander responses. Student shares one strategy for future use.	Role-play cards Upstander badge Chart paper	Group (5-8 students)

Steps:

1. Define "upstander" vs. "bystander."

- Bystander:
"Someone who sees bullying happen but doesn't do anything to stop it."
Key idea: They notice it, but they stay on the sidelines.

- Upstander:
"Someone who sees bullying happen and does something safe to help the person being bullied."
Key idea: They take action—like telling an adult, checking on the person, or speaking up kindly.

- Tip for teaching: Use simple language and examples from everyday school life.
Recommended Resources to help portray definitions/start conversations surrounding integrity, empathy, and advocacy.

- Books:
Stand Up and Speak Out! by Melissa Higgins – great examples of kids being upstanders.
The Juice Box Bully by Bob Sornson and Maria Dismondy – teaches kids how to respond to bullying positively.
Chrysanthemum by Kevin Henkes – shows empathy and kindness, indirectly teaching upstander behavior.

- Videos / Media:
Kid-focused PSA videos on bullying and upstanders:
StopBullying.gov Videos for Kids – short, age-appropriate clips. (I added the reference for this below)
BrainPOP – Bullying (subscription may be required) – animated video explaining bullying, bystanders, and upstanders. (I added the reference for this below)

2. Group acts out and discusses role-play situations described in the 'Role Play Cards' handout.

3. Collaboratively create an "Upstander Oath", emphasizing focus on integrity, empathy, and advocacy.

Example Upstander Oath

- "I promise to be an upstander, not a bystander.
- I will stand up for others safely and kindly.
- I will tell an adult if someone is hurt or bullied.
- I will use my words and actions to include, support, and protect my friends.
- I will help make my school a safe and caring place for everyone."

Tips for Using the Oath:

- Discussion First: Explain what a bystander and upstander are.
- Personalize: Let students add one personal action they will commit to.
- Visual Cue: Students can sign their oath or create a small poster to display.
- Practice: Role-play scenarios where students practice being upstanders.

Closing:

Students earn badges when being recognized for being an upstander.
Extension: Post class-wide "Upstander Spotlight" wall.

Handouts:

"Role Play Cards"

Activity 3-5: "Tactful Toothpaste - Choosing Our Words Mindfully"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will explore the impact of their words and actions on other people, identifying respectful and kind ways to uplift their classmates, friends, and loved ones.	Kindness, Empathy, Courage, Respect, and Integrity	Relational safety with structured group sharing, rituals of belonging, and peer empathy.	Grades 3-5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competencies - Social Awareness Relationship Skills Self Awareness Self Management	Teacher observation with class discussion and student deliverable (sticky note response during closing - ticket for dismissal).	Small tube of toothpaste for every group Toothpicks for every group (1-2 per student) Parchment Paper Papertowels/Wipes for cleanup One sticky note for each student (closing)	Group

Steps:

1. PREP:
   - Place parchment paper on desk/table (secure with tape)
   - Place 1 tube of toothpaste (travel size) on the parchment paper
   - Place a handful of toothpicks at each table

2. HOOK:
   - Have students gather together on the floor. Have students close their eyes and recall the KINDEST thing someone has said to them this week. Encourage them to share with their neighbor and then take a few volunteer answers to share with the whole class. Prompt discussion with the following:

   * WHO shared the kindness?
   * WHEN did they share the kindness?
   * WHERE were you when they shared with you?
   * HOW did it make you feel?
   * Call out how easy it was for the students to call out the details of these kind moments, reinforcing that words carry EMOTIONAL IMPACT.

3. BEGIN THE LESSON (Group)
   - Split the group into table groups (3-5 students per group).
   - Discuss the responsible use of toothpaste and not opening the cap until prompted by the teacher.
   - Choose one student per group to uncap and squeeze out as much toothpaste as possible onto the parchment paper.
   - "Great job! Now your group is responsible for putting ALL the toothpaste back in the tube, BUT you can only use your toothpicks! You have 5 min!"
   - NOTE: You may have to have students wash hands before joining back on the floor as a class. Leave table cleanup for after the lesson is finished.

4. DISCUSSION (Whole Class):
   - Have students return to the floor for a discussion.
   - Have the students who uncapped and squeezed the toothpaste stand up. Ask them:
   - How long did it take you to squeeze out the toothpaste?
   - How easy was that for you?
   - Have those students sit down and proceed with group discussion:
   - For the rest of the group, how long did it take you to get the toothpaste back in the tube?
   - Were you successful in getting all the toothpaste back in?
   - How difficult was it to use the toothpicks?
   - What do you think the toothpaste represents? (our words/actions)
   - When it comes to bullying (hurtful words and actions), how do you think this relates to the toothpaste? (our words and actions can happen fast and we need to think them through before squirting them out so quickly by showing respect and integrity towards others, because it can be hard to get past the pain of them like it was hard to put the toothpaste back in

the bottle and took a long time)
- Can you easily take words and actions back?
- How can you show courage and empathy when talking to others in the future?

Closing:

- Have students return to their seats and begin the clean-up process. Once clean, revisit how words/actions have an emotional impact and that we should choose our words/actions to others mindfully.

- Consider using the clean-up process as an opportunity to represent repair/reconciliation. Discuss that the same impact can be felt with kind words, reminding them of how we started the lesson. Finish with the following question:

- Ticket for Dismissal:
Prompt students to write a kindness they hope to share with a classmate, loved one, or friend this week.

Activity 6-8: "Behind the Screen"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Explore the emotional impact of cyberbullying and build a personal online safety plan.	Responsibility, Self-Awareness, Digital Citizenship	Validates harm; empowers students with strategies.	Grades 6-8
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SMS 9: Demonstrate personal safety skills International Society for Technology in Education ISTE 2b: Positive, ethical online behavior	Student can identify harmful digital behaviors. Student creates and explains a personal safety plan.	Mock messages Digital Boundaries Plan	Individual

Steps:

1. Review example online messages using the 'Mock Messages' handout.

2. Instructions:
   - Sit with the student and review each message on the handout.
   - Discuss whether each message is positive, neutral, or harmful.

3. Ask guiding questions:
   - "How would this message make you feel?"
   - "How might the person who sent it feel?"
   - "What could be a positive way to respond?"

4. Discuss emotions and reactions to cyberbullying, based on the examples shared in the 'Mock Messages' handout, calling attention to responsibility, self-awareness, and digital citizenship. Goal: Help the student articulate emotional responses to cyberbullying.

- Prompts:
  * "If you received a message like this, what would you feel?"
  * "Have you ever seen or experienced something similar online?"
  * "What strategies have you used to cope with negative messages?"

5. Follow-Up: Identify physical, emotional, and social reactions (e.g., tense muscles, upset feelings, wanting to isolate). Create a plan including what to post, when to block, and how to report. Goal: Empower the student to make positive choices online, exploring the character traits of responsibility, self-awareness, and digital citizenship.

- Template / Guide:
  What to Post: Positive messages, thoughtful comments, support for peers.
  When to Block: If someone is mean, threatening, or making you uncomfortable.
  How to Report: Step-by-step process for reporting harmful content to a trusted adult or platform.
- Discussion:
Review the plan together.

- Ask: "How would you feel using this plan if something negative happens online?"
Adjust strategies based on the student's comfort level.

Closing:

Set up a digital "go-to" support list. Extension: Create a Public Service Announcement or visual on cyber safety.

Handouts:

Behind the Screen

Mock Messages

Digital Boundaries Plan

Cyber Safety Go-To Support List/PSA Activity

Activity 6-8: "CyberSmart Circle"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Raise awareness about online behavior and promote group responsibility.	Respect, Integrity	Builds peer accountability and safe expression.	Grades 6-8
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Self-Management, Social Awareness International Society for Technology in Education ISTE 2c: Positive digital contribution	Students participate in circle discussion. Groups creates a shared "CyberSmart Agreement."	Scenario cards Circle norms Chart paper	Group (6-10 students)

Steps:

1. Establish talking circle norms, focusing on respect and integrity.

2. Discuss cyberbullying scenarios using 'Scenario Cards' handout.

3. Create group agreement on respectful digital using the 'CyberSmart Circle' handout.

Closing:

"One action I'll take" round-robin.

Extension: Circle writing: "My digital values."

Please see 'One Action I'll Take Round Robin/My Digital Values Activity' handout.

Handouts:

CyberSmart Circle

Scenario Cards

"One Action I'll Take Round Robin"/My Digital Values Activity

Activity 9-12: “Call It Out: Digital Boundaries & Power”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Analyze power dynamics in digital bullying and practice assertive responses.	Respect, Integrity	Supports boundary-setting and identity safety.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SMS 10: Transition management International Society for Technology in Education ISTE 2d: Responsible identity/data management	Students identify power-based digital bullying. Students verbalizes an assertive, respectful response.	Decision tree Power & Respect chart Digital Boundaries Tip Sheet	Individual

Steps:

1. Analyze sample digital exchanges using the “Decision Tree” handout as a guide.

2. Discuss power imbalance, respect, and integrity. Use the “Power and Respect Chart” to begin discussions..

3. Practice using scripts for responses and boundary-setting using the “Digital Boundaries Tip Sheet” to practice.

Closing:

Create “My Non-Negotiables” for online behavior.

Extension: Create digital boundaries tip sheet for peers.

Handouts:

Decision Tree

Power & Respect Chart

Digital Boundaries Tip Sheet

Activity 9-12: “Social Media on Trial”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Help students examine online choices, peer pressure, and ethical consequences.	Accountability, Perspective-Taking, Justice	Allows perspective-taking, gives voice to impacted roles, builds justice.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Responsible Decision-Making International Society for Technology in Education ISTE 2a: Cultivate digital identity and reputation	Student participates in character perspective. Group discussion includes prevention strategies.	Court case scripts Role cards Verdict worksheet	Group (8-12 students)

Steps:

1. Assign case roles and background using the “Court Case Scripts” under Handouts and assign the roles.

2. Conduct trial and present arguments using the “Role Cards” from the Handouts, and review the arguments.

3. Group debriefs and discusses resolution and ethical alternatives using the “Verdict Worksheet” from the handouts. In conversations, draw attention to the character traits of accountability, perspective-taking, and justice (amongst others).

Closing:

“What I learned about impact” written reflection.

Extension: Write a new, healthier version of the scenario.

Handouts:

Court Case Scripts

Role Cards

Verdict Worksheet

Community Violence

According to the Centers for Disease Control (2024) and The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (n.d.) community violence is defined as violence that occurs outside of the home in public areas, typically between individuals that do not have a familial connection. Community violence is non-accidental, happens quickly, and usually victims do not have any warning (NCTSN, n.d.). Some examples of community violence are gang-related violence, mass shootings, attacks with weapons, robberies, sexual assault, homocide, terrorist attacks, chronic poverty, racism, and natural disasters (NCTSN, n.d.; SAMHSA, 2024).

Effects on children

Social Impact

Children who have witnessed or experienced community violence see the world as an unpredictable, frightening, and unsafe place (NCTSN, n.d.). Schools can counter this view of the world for these children by building a community within the classroom and school that is predictable and safe, through building rituals and routines, and maintaining consistent and logical consequences to unsafe behaviors. Witnessing violence is considered an adverse childhood experience, which studies have shown can have lasting, negative effects on health, well-being, and opportunity (CDC, 2024). These same children can struggle with attachment, finding it difficult to trust, regulate themselves emotionally, and develop appropriate and safe relationships (Attachment & Trauma Network, n.d.). These experiences can increase the risks of injury, sexually transmitted infections, maternal and child health problems, teen pregnancy, involvement in sex trafficking, and a wide range of chronic diseases and leading causes of death such as cancer, diabetes, heart disease, and suicide (CDC, 2024). Community violence in particular lends itself to these outcomes by reducing an individual's feelings of safety accessing typical places and services that are associated with social protective factors, such as parks, libraries, churches, education systems, and health-related supports (CDC, 2024). Schools can play a part in increasing feelings of safety through becoming hubs for multiple agencies and partners to meet, through hosting evening open door events where families can safely access outside services in one place.

Children exposed to community violence need schools to act not only as learning environments but also as stabilizing spaces of safety and trust. Research shows that trauma-informed practices that emphasize predictability, routine, and connection can counter the sense of instability and fear that many of these students carry (NCTSN, n.d.).

One practical approach is implementing structured morning meetings or daily check-ins. These routines provide consistency and allow students to share emotions in a safe space, which has been shown to increase teacher efficacy and improve student engagement. Incorporating social-emotional learning into everyday classroom practices also helps students regulate emotions and build relational trust, two skills that are especially critical for children who have experienced trauma (Trauma Responsive Educator Collaborative, n.d.).

A layered approach: consistent daily routines that build stability, trauma-informed schoolwide practices that strengthen belonging, and community partnerships that extend protective supports beyond the classroom. When implemented collectively, these strategies enable schools to restore a sense of safety and possibility for children navigating the lasting effects of community violence.

Emotional Impact

Attachment, which is the ability to form and maintain secure relationships, is an important protective factor for children, and difficulty with this area is common for children who have witnessed and experienced community violence (Attachment & Trauma Network, n.d.). Children who have witnessed or experienced community violence are more likely to view violent responses as socially acceptable, due to social scripting, modeling, and desensitization to violence (Huesmann, 2011). These same children are also more likely to show less empathy towards others, and struggle with self-esteem (Huth-Bocks et al., 2001).

VS Case Study - Community Violence

Middle school boys at Victory were increasingly being pulled toward neighborhood gangs, where the loudest voices were older teens carrying weapons and selling drugs. To counter this, we brought in male role models — coaches, mentors, and even local police officers — to run our after-school basketball team. Practices weren't just about basketball; they were about Responsibility, Self-Discipline, and Perseverance. Through mentoring conversations and guest speakers, boys who once saw violence as strength began to see courage in showing up to class, respecting teammates, and controlling emotions on the court. Over time, referrals dropped, grades improved, and one student even remarked, "Coach is the first man who ever told me I was worth something."

Schools are in a good position to positively impact these children emotionally through classroom activities that build emotional connections between peers and teachers, such as drum circles, creating classroom art, and making meals together.

Cognitive Impact

Exposure to chronic and ongoing violence in the community can lead to disruption in how children's brains develop, which can cause disruptions in every facet of their lives, from how they learn and function in society to interpersonal relationships (Fox & Shonkoff, 2011). Further, exposure to community violence can have profound cognitive consequences for children, disrupting brain development and affecting concentration, memory, and executive functioning skills (Fox & Shonkoff, 2011; NCTSN, 2008). According to research, children who experience this type of trauma can struggle with concentration and memory, the ability to organize and process information, impaired emotional regulation, impulse control, and executive functioning skills (NCTSN, 2008). These impairments often manifest in the classroom as difficulties with reading, organizing information, or regulating behavior, which contribute to lower academic achievement and higher dropout rates (SAMHSA, 2024). Community violence more often impacts learning difficulties as well as academic performance indicators that demonstrate longer-term effects, such as lower GPA, struggles learning to read, a higher rate of absences and dropping-out, and a higher rate of exclusionary disciplinary actions such as long-term suspension and expulsion (NCTSN, 2008, SAMHSA, 2024).

Schools can impact cognitive development and get children closer to grade level by avoiding "zero-tolerance" discipline policies, and replacing punishment-based programs with programs that support cognitive development while adopting restorative practices and trauma-informed approaches that emphasize relationship building and skill development. Practical strategies include integrating mentoring programs that provide consistent adult role models, which enhance school connectedness, a protective factor shown to reduce the long-term mental health risks of adversity (Marino, 2020). Additionally, after-school programs that combine academic tutoring with trauma-informed supports can improve cognitive skills while providing safe environments for practice and growth (Herrenkohl & Lee, 2019). Embedding structured routines such as morning meetings and classroom check-ins also supports executive functioning by providing predictability and opportunities to practice self-regulation. Taken together, these approaches strengthen both cognitive development and school engagement, enabling students exposed to violence to rebuild skills and move closer to grade-level performance.

Physical Impact

Community violence can impact a child in a number of ways. A child can experience an immediate physical impact, such death and serious injuries resulting from weapons and other forms of person on person aggression. There are also long-term, or chronic impacts that follow a child through into adulthood. Traumatic events activate a child's 'natural alarm system', which utilizes many hormones, including cortisol, to prepare the body to fight or flee (SAMHSA, 2024; Karen Purvis Institute, 2019; Mayo Clinic, 2023). Cortisol is our main stress hormone, and helps to shut down the less important short-term survival functions, such as our immune system, digestion, reproduction, and growth (Mayo Clinic, 2023). Research has found that children who are continuously exposed to traumatic events, such as those experiencing community violence, remain in fight or flight, and exhibit continuously elevated levels of cortisol, leading to digestive problems, headaches, muscle pain, weight gain, and over-reaction to noises/movements (Karen Purvis Institute, 2019; Mayo Clinic, 2023). In addition to immediate and longer-term physical impacts, children living in areas with ongoing community violence often suffer from the side effects of safe places to play, walk, and seek out resources such as churches and community centers. Children living in these settings have very real and legitimate reasons for feeling unsafe inside and outside their homes, and lose out on opportunities to connect with others and participate in healthy activities. Schools can create safe spaces for children to increase physical activity by keeping recess for children, no matter what, and making sure that all children have the opportunity to exercise and have healthy food options to choose from.

Community violence not only causes immediate physical harm but also has lasting effects on children's bodies through chronic activation of the stress response system. Prolonged exposure to violence keeps cortisol levels elevated, which research shows can weaken the immune system, disrupt growth, and contribute to ongoing physical health issues such as headaches, digestive problems, and heightened reactivity to environmental stressors (Karen Purvis Institute, 2019; Mayo Clinic, 2023; SAMHSA, 2024). These biological effects are compounded by environmental barriers, as children in violent neighborhoods often lack safe spaces to play or access to health-promoting resources such as parks, churches, and community centers (Vargas & Friedlander, 2019).

Schools can intervene by intentionally creating consistent, safe opportunities for physical well-being. Maintaining daily recess, regardless of academic pressures, provides essential movement that helps regulate stress hormones and support healthy development. Beyond recess, schools can partner with community organizations to provide after-school sports, nutrition programs, and wellness initiatives that rebuild protective factors and counteract the scarcity of safe environments outside of school (Clarke et al., 2024). Offering healthy food options within the school day also supports children whose access to nutritious meals may be limited by unsafe neighborhoods or systemic barriers (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). Together, these strategies not only mitigate the physical toll of chronic stress but also signal to children that their safety and health are prioritized, helping them reclaim a sense of stability within their school environment.

Where to Get Additional Support

NCTSN, Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators: https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//child_trauma_toolkit_educators.pdf

NCTSN, Helping Youth After Community Trauma: Tips for Educators:
https://www.nctsn.org/resources/helping-youth-after-community-trauma-tips-educators

Karyn Purvis Institute of Child Development, Nurture Group Outline:
https://child.tcu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Nurture-Group-Outline.pdf

American Red Cross Resource Directory:
https://www.redcross.org/get-help/resources.html

NCSMH, Supporting Students, Staff, Families, and Communities Impacted by Violence:
https://www.schoolmentalhealth.org/media/som/microsites/ncsmh/documents/fliers-resources-misc-docs/resources/Supporting-After-Violence.pdf

Sesame Workshop, Violence
https://sesameworkshop.org/topics/violence/

Activity K-4: "Safe Paths"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
To provide a calming, repetitive art activity for children after exposure to violence in their community. To symbolize that even when the world feels unsafe or confusing, there are ways through and safe people who help. To affirm that children are not defined by the violence around them but are whole, loved, and resilient.	Resilience, Trust, Hope, Courage, Perseverance	This activity reinforces safety and predictability. Community violence can disrupt a child's sense of stability and control; tracing and creating a labyrinth offers a safe, structured activity that models consistency and calm. The labyrinth metaphor reassures children that even when life feels confusing or scary, there are safe paths and supportive relationships to guide them.	Grades K–4
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 2: Self-Management CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills	Observed ability to identify emotions and sources of connection. Verbal or creative expression of emotion through art or discussion	Paper Crayons	Individual or small group with adult facilitator

Steps:

Facilitator's Note: Trauma related to community violence may include fear of separation, uncertainty, or grief. Be sure this lesson is scaffolded with wellness supports and check-ins. Before delivering this activity, please ensure you have gained approval or consultation from your school's counseling department and/or leadership team.

Engaging in trauma-informed dialogue with children is meaningful work, and it must be done with safeguards in place, clear follow-up plans, and alignment with your school's broader wellness supports. After the session, consider checking in with your mental health team or school social worker to share any observations or to debrief supportively.

1. Welcome and Opening (2–3 minutes)

- Give each child a blank sheet of paper and crayons.
- Prompt and model breathing technique:
- Let's take three slow breaths. As we breathe, we remember this is a safe space where we can draw and feel calm.

2. Drawing the Labyrinth (5 minutes)

- Model and then allow the child to: *Start with a small circle in the middle. Then make a bigger circle around it, leaving space.*
- Keep going with loops and turns until your paper is full.
- Your labyrinth can be as wiggly as you want—it's your safe path.
- Allow the child to make 1–2 labyrinths, choosing different colors if desired.

3. Tracing the Safe Path (4-5 minutes)

- Model and then allow the child to: *Now use your finger or crayon to trace your path. Imagine you are walking safely through. Every turn shows you are still moving forward.*

Optional discussion question: Who helps you feel safe when things around you don't feel safe? Who gives you hope? Can you think of one person you can always walk toward and trust?

Closing:

Display the art in a prominent place.

Make an aloud connection

i.e., Just like your labyrinth, life sometimes feels twisty and confusing. But there are safe paths and people who care about you.

Close by providing a short affirmation

I.e., I/you/we can find safe paths. I/you/we am cared for. I/you/we am strong.

Activity 4-8: "Connection Toss"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
To nurture positive peer connections after conflict or social strain. To practice using language that affirms dignity and strengths. To encourage empathy, perspective-taking, and kindness in a safe, structured way.	Empathy, Respect, Compassion, Kindness, Courage	This activity reinforces safety, relational repair, and unconditional positive regard. After experiencing or witnessing conflict or violence, children can carry bias, hurt, fear, insecurity or shame. The simple act of tossing and catching provides a regulating rhythm, while the affirmations tied to each toss model dignity-centered communication. The activity re-establishes predictable, safe connections that help children feel valued and seen.	Grades 4-8
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 2: Self-Management CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills CASEL Core 5: Responsible Decision-Making	Observed ability to identify emotions and sources of connection. Verbal or creative expression of emotion through art or discussion.	Tennis ball Moderately sized, clutter free space	Small group with adult facilitator

Steps:

- Facilitator's Note: Be sure this lesson is scaffolded with wellness supports and check-ins. Before delivering this activity, please ensure you have gained approval or consultation from your school's counseling department and/or leadership team. Engaging in trauma-informed dialogue with children is meaningful work, and it must be done with safeguards in place, clear follow-up plans, and alignment with your school's broader wellness supports. After the session, consider checking in with your mental health team or school social worker to share any observations or to debrief supportively.

1. Welcome and Opening (2–3 minutes)

- Gather children in a circle.
- Hold up the tennis ball and set general safety expectations
  i.e., we gently roll or toss the ball to another person in our circle while we make eye contact
- Explain how we will use the tennis ball today:
  i.e., This ball will help us practice connection. When you toss it, you'll say something kind and true about the person who catches it.
- Practice one deep breath as a group before starting.

2. Modeling the Toss (3 minutes)

- Toss the ball to a child and say something kind and true
  i.e., I appreciate how you made space for others today.
  I noticed you helping your classmate with their math today.
- Coach that child to then toss to someone else, adding their own kind or affirming statement.
- Keep going until all children have received the ball at least once.

3. Guided Practice (5-6 minutes)

- Create prompts that are accessible for your student group and focus on using language that affirms dignity and strengths.
- Round 1 prompt: Say something you admire about the person you toss to.
- Round 2 prompt: Say something you hope for the person you toss to.
- Round 3 prompt: Say something you've noticed the person contributes to our community, making it better/safer/enjoyable.
- Encourage eye contact and gentle tosses.

Closing:

Small group discussion

- What did it feel like to hear kind words? What did it feel like to say to them?

Close by providing a short affirmation

- *I.e., Even when we have conflicts, we can always rebuild connections. Words can remind us that everyone here belongs.*

Activity 9-12: "Give What You Can, Take What You Need"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will self-reflect on personal challenges and provide thoughtful, caring, and anonymous support to peers.	Empathy, Courage, Resilience, Perseverance	Empowerment through choice, Rituals of belonging, and peer empathy, anonymity to protect vulnerable disclosures	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competencies - Social Awareness Relationship Skills Self Awareness Self Management	Teacher observation during class discussion.	Multicolored sticky notes for each student Bulletin space or space on the classroom door for stickies to be placed	Whole Class

Steps:

- PREPARATION:

NOTE: This activity is best used at the beginning of the school year, in preparation for a difficult exam/finals, or in response to community violence impacting the emotional well-being of your students. If you would like the encouragement to extend beyond your classroom, you can opt to prepare the bulletin outside of your classroom walls (i.e., bulletin at the entry, outside of the classroom door).

- Before beginning the activity, ensure every student has access to a stack of multicolored sticky notes and that you have prepared a bulletin/door with the following title: "Give What You Can, Take What You Need" with space for the stickies to be placed underneath once the activity is completed. Write the following key on the whiteboard:

  * Green: Statement of Motivation/Encouragement (Ex: "You've made it through all your hardest days.")

  * Blue: Quote/Inspiration (Ex: "If we stop defining each other by what we are not and start defining ourselves by what we are, we can all be freer" - Emma Watson)

  * Yellow: Affirmation of Character (Ex: "You are strong and capable!")

BEGIN THE LESSON:

1. Encourage students to take a moment to reflect:
Think of a past, current, or future challenge that you have faced—no need to share it out loud. Once you have identified your challenge, put a thumbs-up on your desk.

If in response to community violence: Address the community violence that is impacting the emotional well-being of the students, acknowledge and affirm the hurt they may be experiencing as a result, and that this activity is intended to support themselves/others.

During this challenge, what was it you needed to hear or wish someone had told you to help you persevere or prevail?

2. Take the sticky notes placed on your desk and select at least two colors from the categories displayed in the key on the whiteboard. Write what you need to hear, keeping in mind this will be displayed on the bulletin/classroom door for other students to use when they need it most. Keep empathy, courage, resilience, perseverance, etc. in mind as you complete. Do not put your name on the sticky so we can all remain anonymous.

3. Encourage students to place their stickies on the prepared bulletin/classroom door.

Closing:

Once all students have placed their stickies, let them know this is intended to be an active and ongoing resource for the students throughout the school year.

Encourage students to GIVE or TAKE a sticky note at any time they need it.

Activity 9-12: "Voices of Strength: Story Circles & Action Plan"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Foster resilience, provide a safe space for reflection/expression, encourage empathy and community building, empower students with agency	Reflection, Resilience, Empathy, Empowerment	Safety: Clear norms, right to pass, grounding activity. Trust & Empowerment: Student choice in sharing and project design. Connection: Story circles and collaborative problem-solving. Character-Building: Emphasizing resilience, empathy, and courage.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 2: Self-Management CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills	During the Strength Mapping and Action Planning stages, students demonstrate collaboration and problem-solving. Teacher uses an observation checklist to see if students actively contributed an idea (verbally or in writing), showed respect for others' voices, and helped build on others' ideas or solutions. Optional Extension of Self-Assessment: Students rate themselves on a simple exit slip: I listened respectfully. (Always, Sometimes, Not Yet); I shared my thoughts or ideas. (Always, Sometimes, Not Yet); practiced empathy today. (Always, Sometimes, Not Yet	Circle of chairs Talking piece/object Chart paper or white board Markers Sticky notes Journals	Small group/whole class

Steps:

1. Begin with a mindfulness exercise. A good, easy one to remember is a grounding activity like asking the students to think of 5 things they can see, 4 things they can hear, 3 things they can touch/feel, 2 things they can smell or taste. Modify as needed for the population.

2. Establish the norms of the circle. (Some examples could be confidentiality, respect, the right to talk or stay silent)

3. Prompt students with reflective (non-triggering) questions such as: "What helps you feel safe at school/in the community/at home?" or "What role does kindness, resilience, and/or courage play when you face hardships?" or "Who do you admire for the way they responded to a hardship? Why?"

    a. Optional: You may pre-teach or start with a discussion around what the traits mean (kindness, resilience, and/or courage) and how they are relevant in real-life.

4. Only the student with the talking piece/object speaks and the object moves to everyone. Each student can speak or can pass.

5. After the students answer 1-3 questions, have students list character traits they either thought of or heard during the activity, using the sticky notes.

6. If the group is small, they can all work together to create a "strength wall" and put the traits they listed up on the chart paper. If the group is large, put students into smaller groups. They can arrange the traits and discuss how these qualities can help communities overcome violence and trauma.

7. After this activity, have students return to their seats and ask, "What small action can we take that would bring more safety, connection, and hope to our community?" Students can brainstorm with their neighbors or small groups of 3 or 4.

8. Have one student share from each small group.

9. Discuss as a group which one action they want to focus on from the suggestions. Students may want the entire group to focus on one action, or each individual student may choose to make a personal action, or both! (Some examples you may want to solicit if students are stuck could be: peer mentorship, a community mural, a catching kindness campaign, or even a community service activity).

10. Have students share one word of hope or resilience they will take with them.

Closing:

1. Give an affirmation to students. (Make sure it is applicable, but an example could be: "Your voices matter and we are stronger than we think. Together we can build resilience, connection, and care.")

2. A follow up could be a journaling prompt for students to do on their own time. Some examples: "What does resilience mean to me?" or "What is one way I personally can add to the safety or kindness of my community?"

3. The students can also later showcase what action they decided to take.

Professional Development: "Affirmation Station"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
To foster a culture of care and emotional support among educators and staff. To offer a low-pressure, meaningful opportunity for affirmation and encouragement in times of community or personal trauma. To increase educator self-awareness of the impact their words and presence have on others.	Empathy, Compassion, Hope, Courage, Gratitude	This activity is designed to increase feelings of safety, connection, and community among staff. It offers a predictable and empowering way to foster mutual encouragement, which supports emotional regulation and relational trust.	Adult educators and school staff (can be adapted for students grades 4+)
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 3: Social Awareness CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills CASEL Core 5: Responsible Decision-Making	N/A	Small cards (index cards, affirmation-style cards, or themed cutouts) Pens or markers Envelopes or folders for anonymous submission (or a decorated drop-box) Bulletin board, poster board, or designated staff lounge wall Binder clips or thumbtacks (if displaying) Printed signage explaining the station and invitation to participate Optional: basket with positive quotes or scripture for inspiration	Group

Steps:

1. Introduce the Concept & Location
    - Briefly explain the concept during a morning huddle, email, or staff newsletter.
    - Emphasize that this is an anonymous, voluntary practice to affirm each other's strength, character, or presence during hard times, focusing on empathy, compassion, hope, courage, gratitude, etc. .

2. Set Up the Station
    - Choose a quiet, frequented space (staff lounge, copy room).
    - Display instructions, pens, and blank cards.

3. Add a drop-box for submissions and a space for displaying cards.

4. Invite Contributions
    - Encourage staff to write as they feel moved—no quotas, no pressure.
    - Consider subtle prompts in daily emails or quotes posted near the station.

5. Post Affirmations
    - Review cards for appropriateness (optional).
    - Display anonymously in a visible area or distribute a PDF/photo collection to staff via email.

Closing:

Optional: Read a few aloud at a team meeting or incorporate into communications like an email, newsletter, etc.

Invite staff to journal or reflect individually on a prompt such as:

"What affirmation this week most surprised or encouraged you? What does it remind you about our community?"

Extension Ideas:

- Create a digital version using Google Forms and Slides.
- Introduce "Student Affirmation Station" using simplified prompts and peer encouragement.
- Integrate with a prayer wall or intentions board in faith-based settings.
- Pair with restorative circles to share affirmations verbally at the end of staff meetings.

Handouts:

Sample prompts for cards:

"I saw your courage when..."
"You bring light by..."
"Thank you for being someone who..."
"When you [action], I felt hope."

Homelessness and Displacement

The rate of homelessness in the United States is recorded yearly by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2024), using a 'point-in-time' estimate that attempts to count the exact number of individuals who 'lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence' during a 10-day interval at the beginning of the year. HUD only considers literal homelessness, so does not count individuals who are receiving assistance with temporary shelter or staying with family/friends (HUD, 2024). The most recent report, released for 2024, recorded a total of 771,480 people experiencing homelessness during that interval, with a full one-third of those individuals being families with children, totalling 259,473 people (HUD, 2024). This is the largest population of families experiencing homelessness since data collection began in 2007 (HUD, 2024).

The definition of homeless can vary, depending on the agency and services provided. For the purpose of this audience, we will utilize the definition provided by the McKinney-Vento Act, which was enacted in 1987 by the federal government with the purpose of ensuring that school-aged children who are experiencing homelessness are able to access a free and appropriate public education without barriers (National Center for Homeless Education, n.d.). McKinney-Vento shares the HUD definition of "individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence", but expands that definition to include shared housing, temporary housing (motels, campgrounds, etc.), migratory children, and children who are considered unaccompanied minors due to being in foster care or other emergency shelters (HUD, 2024; NCHE, n.d.).
This expanded definition changes how we look at the number of individual children experiencing homelessness in the United States, revealing the number to be a staggering **1,374,537** children during the 2022-2023 school year (NCHE, 2024). It is important to understand that these numbers are only the students who have been identified as qualifying for services by their local LEA. This population is quite often hidden, due to factors such as lack of rural resources, overburdened resources in urban areas, threat of family separation/removal of children, and fear of negative interactions with safety networks such as law enforcement and educational systems (SchoolHouse Connection, 2024).

When working with this population, it is important to think about the language that we use, particularly to describe and categorize who these individuals and families are (SchoolHouse Connection, n.d.). Terms such as 'unhoused' and 'housing insecurity' fail to meet the educational definition of homelessness, and imply that simply having a home, or maybe being worried about losing a home, defines the complex and traumatic issue of *experiencing* homelessness (SchoolHouse Connection, n.d.). People experience homelessness as an event that happens to them, and the way we speak about that experience can have a positive or negative impact on services, how they are accessed, and how safe these individuals feel within our education system (SchoolHouse Connection, n.d.).

Effects on children

Social Impact

While homelessness is not considered a separate category of adverse childhood experience, studies have shown that children experiencing homelessness are at a much higher risk of experiencing adverse childhood experiences while homeless, and when they do, they have a more negative outcome long-term on health, well-being, and opportunity (CDC, n.d.). These same children also struggle with attachment, finding it difficult to trust, regulate themselves emotionally, and develop appropriate and safe relationships (Attachment & Trauma Network, n.d.). Children benefit from safe social connections, such as safe neighborhoods, education, healthcare, and social networks, and rely heavily on their parents to build and demonstrate those connections from an early age (Heineman, 2010; Preston et al., 2024). These protective factors, considered 'social determinants of health' are important community connections that are frequently absent or broken amongst children who have experienced homelessness (Heineman, 2010; Preston et al., 2024).

Schools can support these students by creating a safe and predictable environment where positive social interactions are encouraged. Structured group activities, peer mentoring, and cooperative learning opportunities allow children to practice communication, empathy, and conflict-resolution skills in a controlled, supportive setting. Teachers and staff can model respectful interactions and provide consistent guidance on social norms. Referral to school counselors or small social skills groups can further help students build confidence, repair social connections, and develop healthy peer relationships.

Emotional Impact

Children who are homeless or displaced are significantly more likely to suffer from mental health disorders than their housed peers. For instance, a meta-analysis found that 10–26% of homeless preschoolers required clinical evaluation for mental health problems; among school-aged homeless children, this number rose to 24–40%, about two to four times higher than rates in similarly poor but housed children (Ojha et al., 2013). They also more frequently show symptoms of depression, anxiety, and behavioral problems. Emotional and behavioral diagnoses (e.g., conduct problems, ADHD, oppositional defiant disorder) are elevated. Some studies report that both externalizing behaviors (like aggression, acting out) and internalizing symptoms (withdrawal, anxiety, depression) are common (Bernhardt et al., 2024). Youth who are homeless with family also report high rates of suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and self-injury. One large U.S. study showed that among adolescents who had experienced family homelessness in the past year, about 21% reported suicidal ideation, and about 9.3% had attempted suicide; self-injury was reported by nearly 30% (Gilbertson et al., 2016). For younger children, forced displacement (especially from conflict, disaster, or persecution) is linked to delays in social-emotional and cognitive development. A 2024 systematic review of children aged 0–6 found that displacement adversely affects their social-emotional regulation and cognitive functioning (Bernhardt et al., 2024). Beyond diagnosable disorders, instability in housing or displacement contributes to chronic stress, often via disruption of routines, lack of safety or predictability, overcrowding, loss of familiar environments, and separation from support networks. These stressors can undermine emotion regulation, increase hypervigilance, interfere with sleep, exacerbate fears, and reduce children's capacity for trust and forming stable attachments. Additionally, there are barriers to accessing mental health treatment among these children. Even when experiencing depression or anxiety, children facing housing instability are less likely to receive consistent mental health services (Zehrung et al., 2024).

Children who witness or experience domestic violence often experience intense emotions, including anxiety, depression, guilt, and shame. Schools can support emotional healing by fostering a warm, empathetic, and predictable environment where students feel safe to express feelings. Trauma-informed practices such as active listening, validating emotions, and teaching coping strategies like journaling or guided reflection can help students process their experiences. Access to school-based counseling, small group support, or partnerships with community mental health providers offers additional emotional support. Character education lessons emphasizing resilience, empathy, and self-awareness also reinforce positive emotional development and provide students with tools to navigate stress and build self-confidence. Character education that emphasizes respect, empathy, and integrity can also strengthen students' sense of belonging and self-worth. In addition, schools can partner with mental health professionals, domestic violence advocates, and community agencies to provide access to counseling, small group interventions, and family support services. Staff training on recognizing trauma responses and appropriate referral pathways ensures that students receive timely help. Together, these strategies promote safety, healing, and connectedness, helping children affected by domestic violence trauma succeed both emotionally and academically.

Cognitive Impact

Children who are experiencing homelessness experience many risks to cognitive development and academic success, stemming from internal as well as external factors (Family Housing Fund, 1999; Gultekin et al., 2019). Internal factors that contribute to cognitive developmental delays include chronic stress, prenatal complications, and poor nutrition (Family Housing Fund, 1999). Protective external factors are often absent or difficult to access for children experiencing homelessness: lack of regular access to healthcare, decreased teacher expectations, constant relocation and changing of schools, less access to special services, chronic absenteeism, and more frequent retention (Family Housing Fund, 1999).

Exposure to domestic violence can impair attention, memory, and executive functioning, leading to difficulties in learning, problem-solving, and academic performance. Schools can support these cognitive challenges by using trauma-informed instructional strategies, such as breaking tasks into smaller, manageable steps, providing visual supports, and offering repeated opportunities for practice. Frequent check-ins, scaffolded instruction, and differentiated learning approaches help students stay engaged and reduce frustration. Embedding social-emotional learning into academics can also improve focus and self-regulation, while collaboration with school psychologists ensures appropriate interventions and accommodations for learning needs.

Physical Impact

Children who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness encounter many risks to healthy growth and development (Family Housing Fund, 1999; Gultekin et al., 2019). Research has looked at contributing factors, such as the lack of available nutritious foods and ways to store/prepare them, environmental risks due to substandard housing, and lack of access to consistent healthcare (Family Housing Fund, 1999). A literature review completed by Gultekin et al. (2019) looked at specific health outcomes for children who were experiencing homelessness. Children experiencing homelessness were found to have higher incidence of unaddressed dental issues, vision problems, respiratory issues such as asthma and infections, and ear infections (Gultekin et al., 2019). In addition, children who are unaccompanied were also at a higher risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections, experiencing pregnancy, unsafe/unprotected sex, and food insecurity (Gultekin et al., 2019).

Trauma from domestic violence can manifest physically through sleep disturbances, psychosomatic complaints (headaches, stomachaches), hyperarousal, or heightened startle responses. Schools can address these impacts by recognizing signs of physical stress and offering safe spaces for students to calm down, such as a quiet corner or sensory break area. Incorporating mindfulness exercises, breathing techniques, or short movement activities into the school day can help regulate physiological responses. Coordination with school nurses and health professionals ensures students receive necessary care, while teachers maintain flexibility in schedules or assignments to accommodate periods of physical or emotional distress.

Where to Get Additional Support

National Alliance to End Homelessness

A nonpartisan organization working to prevent and end homelessness through policy, advocacy, research, and public education.
https://endhomelessness.org/ National Alliance to End Homelessness

SchoolHouse Connection

Focused on supporting children and youth affected by homelessness (including those displaced by disasters). Offers resources, technical assistance, and advocacy.
https://schoolhouseconnection.org/ SchoolHouse Connection+1
Their "Resources to Support Children and Youth Displaced by Disasters" page is especially useful. SchoolHouse Connection

Family Promise
Works with community-based coalitions to help families with children achieve sustainable independence through prevention, shelter, stabilization, and housing services.
https://familypromise.org/ familypromise.org

Volunteers of America
Provides emergency shelter, housing support, meals, transitional housing, and other services to people experiencing homelessness.
https://www.voa.org/ Volunteers of America+1

Salvation Army (U.S.) – Homelessness Services
Operates shelters and provides wraparound services (meals, case management, support) for individuals, families, and children.
https://www.salvationarmyusa.org/homelessness/ The Salvation Army USA

HELP USA
Works to prevent homelessness and supports individuals and families in maintaining housing or accessing supportive housing.
https://www.helpusa.org/ HELP USA

Covenant House
Primarily focused on youth, especially those unaccompanied or at risk, offering shelter, case management, and transitional services.
https://www.covenanthouse.org/ Covenant House

StandUp for Kids
Works with unaccompanied youth (up to age 25) to provide outreach, housing support, mentoring, and life skills.
https://www.standupforkids.org

National Homelessness Law Center (NHLC)
Uses legal advocacy, training, and public education to protect the rights of people experiencing homelessness (e.g., ensuring rights under McKinney-Vento).
https://homelesslaw.org

SAMHSA – Homelessness Programs & Resources
Offers federal resources for mental health, substance use, and supportive services specifically for people experiencing homelessness.
https://www.samhsa.gov/communities/homelessness-programs-resources SAMHSA

HUD's Homelessness Assistance Programs
A clearinghouse for HUD-funded programs and resources for individuals and families experiencing homelessness.
https://www.hudexchange.info/homelessness-assistance/ HUD Exchange

Dial 211
In most U.S. areas, dialing **211** connects callers to local social services, including emergency housing, shelter referrals, rent/mortgage assistance, utility assistance, and more.
https://www.usa.gov/emergency-housing USAGov

State / County Homelessness Coordinators / Continuums of Care (CoCs)
Each region typically has a Continuum of Care (CoC) or a county-level homelessness coordinator — schools can find contact information via HUD Exchange or their state department of housing.
(See HUD's Homelessness Assistance link above for resources.)

Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (CCR&Rs)
Particularly useful for families with young children, CCR&Rs can help identify subsidized child care, emergency child care, and referrals to supportive services.
https://www.childcareaware.org/providers/helping-children-and-families-experiencing-homelessness/ Child Care Aware® of America

Activity K-2: "Building Belonging"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
To provide a hands-on, regulating activity. To help children symbolize stability and belonging through building. To gently reinforce that strength and care can come from people, relationships, and community.	Compassion, Trust, Patience, Resilience, Hope	This activity reinforces safety, predictability, and agency. Homelessness often removes a sense of control and stability; stacking blocks provides a safe, structured way to create, knock down, and rebuild on their own terms. The act of naming each block as a strength or source of love affirms dignity and encourages a sense of belonging. The activity also models predictable cycles (build, wobble, rebuild), helping reduce fear around change.	Grades K–2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 2: Self-Management CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills	Observed ability to identify emotions and sources of connection. Verbal or creative expression of emotion through art or discussion.	Stacking blocks A table top or carpeted area with a play mat, tray Quiet, comfortable space	One-on-one or small group (2–4 children) with adult facilitator

Steps:

1. Welcome and Opening (2-3 minutes)

   - Provide each child a set of blocks (at least 8-12 pieces)
   - Open with a short breathing practice or soothing activity
     i.e., Let's take three big breaths. Each time we breathe in, we pick up a block. Each time we breathe out, we set it down.

2. Building Strengths (5-8 minutes)

   - Invite the child to begin to build a tower
   - Narrate and model: Let's build a tower together. Each block can stand for something that helps you feel strong or loved — like family, friends, kindness, or even your favorite toy.
   - Encourage the child to name something for each block as they stack.

3. Talking about Change (10–15 minutes)

   - Narrate and model: *Sometimes towers can wobble or fall. That can feel sad or hard. But just like with these blocks, we can always start again. What helps you feel safe when things change?*
   - Normalize rebuilding: encourage the child to gently knock over their tower and rebuild it.
   - NOTE: Take care not to cause startle by intentionally causing the blocks to fall unexpectedly.
   - Build, and rebuild a few times.

Closing:

1. Invite and model: Stand back and look at the tower.

2. Narrate: This tower shows your strengths and the people who care for you. Even if where you live changes, your strengths and your dignity stay with you.

Activity K-2: "Musical Chairs"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will be able to take the perspective of other people and identify ways they can show empathy or help to someone experiencing homelessness.	Respect, Compassion	Collaboration and Mutuality; Cultural Sensitivity and Historical Trauma; Recognition and Response	Grades K–2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL Competency: Social Awareness, Relationship Skills American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SS 2. Positive, respectful and supportive relationships with students who are similar to and different from them ASCA B-SS 4. Empathy ASCA B-SS 5. Ethical decision-making and social responsibility	Students will be able to identify one way they can show empathy or help someone experiencing	Homelessness Scenario Cards	Whole Group Lesson

Steps:

1 - Hook

   - Do a KWL chart with the students to identify what they know about homelessness.
   - Have them start with K - what they already know about homelessness and then ask them W - what they wonder about or would like to know.
   - Explain that we will learn a little bit about homelessness and challenge them to think about what we need to change in our K (know) and W (wonder) sections and what we want to add to our L (learn) section.

2 - Musical Chairs

   - Ask the students if they remember how to play Musical Chairs.
   - Have them help you set up the chairs, with one less chair than students.
   - Hand out a scenario card to all students.
   - Play musical chairs by having students walk the circle with music and sit in the first chair they can when the music stops.
   - The student that is left without a chair will read their scenario card and the class can determine if there is anything to add or change on the KWL chart.
   - Continue this until all scenario cards are completed.

3 - Perspective and Reflection

   - Have everybody returned to the KWL chart.
   - Work with students to adjust information from their K and W sections and add to the L section until they feel the chart is complete.
   - Then, ask students, "Now that you know more about what it might be like to be experiencing homelessness, what do you think we can do to help show kindness, respect, and compassion to support someone who may be experiencing homelessness?"
   - Record their answers and possibly connect them to the scenarios as a way to identify specific acts of kindness, enhance empathy and perspective taking, and generate ideas.

Closing:

Have students write one way they can show empathy to someone experiencing homelessness on a sticky note. Have them add this to an empathy board they can discuss and view over a few days in class.

Extension: Have students engage in a class-based project to build care kits or engage in a community service experience to support those experiencing homelessness in their community.

Handouts:

Homelessness Scenario Cards

Activity 3-5: "Strengths We Build On"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
To help children reflect on the strengths and supports that give them stability and hope. To use block building as a metaphor for resilience and rebuilding after change. To affirm that their dignity and identity remain constant, no matter their housing situation. To empower children with the language of agency.	Resilience, Hope, Courage, Empathy	This activity reinforces agency, relational safety, and resilience. Homelessness can contribute to instability and powerlessness; building with blocks restores a sense of control and symbolizes the ability to rebuild when life shifts. By naming strengths and supports, children practice reframing instability into resilience and belonging. The activity also models predictable cycles (build, wobble, rebuild), helping reduce fear around change.	Grades K–2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 2: Self-Management CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills CASEL Core 5: Responsible Decision-Making	Observed ability to identify emotions and sources of connection. Verbal or creative expression of emotion through art or discussion.	Sticky notes Stacking blocks Writing tool (i.e., pen, pencil, marker) A table top or carpeted area with a play mat, tray	One-on-one or small group (2–4 children) with adult facilitator

Steps:

1. Welcome and Opening (2-3 minutes)

    - Distribute blocks.
    - Open with a short breathing practice or soothing activity
        i.e., Let's take three breaths. Each time we breathe out, we place a block down. We'll use these blocks to build a tower that tells a story of our strengths and supports.

2. Building Strengths (5-8 minutes)

    - Invite the child to begin to build a tower
    - Narrate and model: Each block you add stands for something that helps you feel strong or safe. It could be a person, a hope, a skill, or a dream.
    - Encourage the child to name something for each block as they stack.

3. Facing Wobbles and Rebuilding (10–15 minutes)

    - Invite the child to gently shake or knock part of the tower.
        NOTE: Be patient if there is hesitancy.
    - Narrate and model: Sometimes towers wobble or fall — just like life can feel shaky. What helps you rebuild when things are hard? Who helps you to have courage and stand strong again?
    - Rebuild together, naming strengths as they add blocks back.
    - Normalize rebuilding: encourage the child to gently knock over their tower and rebuild it, demonstrating reslience.

OPTIONAL: Facilitate an opportunity for children to trade a block and name a strength they see in someone else
Build, and rebuild a few times.

Closing:

1. Invite and model: Stand back and look at the tower.

2. Ask: Looking at your tower, what are the most important blocks that help you stay strong? Which ones will you carry with you no matter where you are?

3. Narrate: Even if where you live changes, your strengths and your dignity are always with you. You can build again and again.

Activity 9-12: "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	**Character Traits Targeted:**	**Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:**	**Age Range:**
Students will learn about Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and how this psychological theory applies to those struggling with financial insecurity, home displacement/ homelessness, or lack of physical safety.	Empathy, Compassion, Service, Resilience	Structured, predictable group sharing and peer empathy.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competencies Social Awareness Relationship Skills	Teacher observation of student discussion. Student Deliverables: Graphic organizer for notes during lecture and 3 local homeless services on the back of the handout.	Maslow's Hierarchy graphic organizer for each student Student access to the device for the research component	Group (4–6 students)

Steps:

1. Read aloud today's objective and hand out the graphic organizer for students to fill in during the video. Let students know their notes on each layer of the hierarchy will be used to facilitate discussion and inform today's research assignment.

2. Play the video: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (Explained in 4 Min).

3. Allow students additional time to complete the graphic organizer if not finished during the video. Review answers, ensuring hierarchy notes are accurate.

4. Discussion (Whole Class):

   - In a whole group setting, ask the following questions:
     According to Maslow, what would prevent someone from reaching self-actualization?
     How might things like home displacement, financial instability, or a lack of physical safety impact someone's overall well-being?

   - Maslow's psychological theory was developed 80+ years ago. What is your opinion on this perspective? How might it apply or not apply to the challenges people face right now? Without sharing this person's personal details, have you ever known someone who struggled with home displacement? How was their life impacted? If they found home security, what resources/support were needed to get their basic needs met?

   - Teacher script: Though there have been many different perspectives on Maslow's Hierarchy, it can encourage us to look through an empathetic lens and show compassion. This may help us realize ways we can support or serve someone or refrain from judging as they may be experiencing something we did not realize.

Closing:

1. Given what you learned about Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, you can see the importance that those struggling with homelessness have access to services and support in order to meet their basic needs. Take the remaining time in class to research 3 local support services available to those struggling with home insecurity.

2. Include a list of the 3 on the back of your graphic organizer, along with a brief description of the services they provide.

Handouts:

Blank Pyramid Graphic Organizer (one per student)

Activity 9-12: “My Circle of Support: Building Strength Through Connection”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	**Character Traits Targeted:**	**Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:**	**Age Range:**
This activity helps students recognize the people, places, and personal strengths that provide stability when life feels uncertain. It builds hope, belonging, and resilience while honoring student voices and lived experiences.	Resilience, Hope, Courage, Empathy, Responsibility, Self-Awareness	Safety: Right to pass, non-stigmatizing activity. Trust & Empowerment: Focus on strengths and choice. Connection: Builds peer empathy and shared understanding. Character-Building: Emphasizes resilience, courage, and responsibility.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 2: Self-Management CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills	Reflection Journal (Individual) Prompt: “What did I discover about my circle of support? What is one way I can strengthen it?” Criteria: Thoughtful reflection, personal connection, character awareness (not grammar or mechanics). 2. Participation/Engagement (Observation) Checklist: respectful listening, effort in mapping, willingness to reflect. 3. Action Commitment (Individual) Students identify and follow through with one small step to strengthen their support network.	Circle of chairs Chart paper or white board Markers/colored pencils Sticky notes Journals Optional: calming background music	Group

Steps:

1. Begin with a mindfulness/grounding exercise. Ask students to do deep breathing or visualize a safe space for them, for example.

2. Establish the norms of the circle. (Some examples could be confidentiality, respect, the right to talk or stay silent)

3. Students draw a large circle on their paper and place themselves in the center. Around the circle, they add supports- People (family, friends, mentors, teachers, coaches); Places (library, youth center, park, classroom); Strengths (perseverance, kindness, creativity, humor). If supports are limited, encourage inclusion of aspirational supports (role models, community resources they’d like to access, or personal strengths they want to grow).

4. Explicit Character Trait Reflection: Introduce four key traits of resilience, hope, courage, and self-awareness. Give simple definitions and examples: Resilience: Bouncing back when things are hard (like retrying after failing a test). Hope: Believing that things can get better (like setting a goal even when it feels far away). Courage: Doing something even when it feels scary (like asking for help). Self-awareness: Knowing your feelings and what you need (like realizing you’re stressed and taking a break). Ask students to choose one trait that feels most meaningful to them right now. On their circle map, they can: Add a symbol or word that represents that trait. Write how that trait has shown up in their life, or how they’d like to strengthen it.

5. In pairs or small groups, students share (if comfortable): Which support on your map is most important to you right now? How does this person, place, or strength help you keep going? Emphasize choice. Students can share as much or as little as they like.

6. Teacher prompts: “What’s one action you can take this week to strengthen your circle of support?” Examples: reaching out to a mentor, practicing self- care, connecting with a resource at school. Students write a short “commitment card” (kept private if they choose).

7. Have anyone share their ideas, if they like.

8. Each student (which wishes to share) shares one word of strength or hope (e.g., courage, kindness, persistence).

Closing:

1. The teacher closes with an affirmation: “No matter what you’re facing, you have strengths within and supports around you. You belong here.” (just an example).

2. Extension: “Letters of Gratitude or Encouragement. After mapping their Circle of Support, students choose one person (mentor, friend, teacher, family member) and write a short note of gratitude or encouragement. If they don’t currently have someone to write to, they can write a “Letter to My Future Self”, focusing on what strengths they want to carry forward (e.g., courage, resilience, hope).

Optional: create a “Wall of Encouragement” in the classroom where students can post anonymous uplifting messages for peers.

Reflection: "Rewriting Scripts for Dignity"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
To reflect on everyday language used with children/students experiencing hardship, particularly displacement, and explore how subtle shifts in words can affirm dignity and promote emotional safety. To practice rewriting language through a lens of empathy, compassion, and respect—recognizing that words can either restore or reduce. To deepen awareness of how language choices can either support or unintentionally harm the development of child/student identity.	Empathy, Compassion, Respect, Humility	This activity helps adults recognize how everyday language choices can either create safety or reinforce stigma. Through intentional, reflective practice, it nurtures supportive relationships and helps children/students feel seen and honored—especially when navigating instability.	Adults
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 2: Self-Management CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills CASEL Core 5: Responsible Decision-Making Students correctly categorize behaviors as helpful or hurtful.	N/A	Pen and paper, journal, or digital device for private reflection A quiet space or calming background music (optional) Reflection prompts (printed or displayed) Optional: breathing or grounding script to open and close the session	Individual

Steps:

1. Start
   - Take a moment to center yourself. Read the following quietly or aloud:
     My words matter.
     They shape the emotional climate I create.
     Today, I reflect not to judge myself, but to grow into someone who speaks with dignity, awareness, and care.

2. Why This Matters
   When a child is experiencing instability or hardship, they may already be carrying messages—spoken and unspoken—about being less than, different, or forgotten. Our language can either reinforce that story or gently rewrite it. We are not here to "save" children. We are here to see them, speak with dignity, and be a stable presence, while showing empathy, compassion, respect, etc. .

3. What to Expect
   You'll reflect on a few common phrases that may arise in moments of frustration, urgency, or misunderstanding. For each, you'll explore:
   - What might this communicate to a young person about themselves?
   - What do I actually want them to know or feel?
   - How can I rephrase it to affirm dignity while still offering structure, care, or direction?

4. Reflection Prompts
   * Take your time. There's no rush to finish. This is about practice, not perfection.

   1. Original Phrase:
      "Why didn't you bring your homework again?"
   - What this might communicate:
     I expect you to fail. You're disappointing. You're irresponsible.
   - What I want to communicate:
     I care about your learning. I know something might be getting in the way. I want to help.
   - My Rewrite:
     Example: "You've been juggling a lot. Want to talk through what would help make this easier next time?"
     Your version: _____

   2. Original Phrase:
      "If you just focused, you'd get this."
   - What this might communicate:
     You're not trying. You're the problem. You should be doing better.
   - What I want to communicate:
     I see you struggling. I believe in your ability. I want to support your learning, not shame it.
   - My Rewrite:
     Example: "Seems like it's hard to focus right now—want a short break or a different way to try this?"
     Your version: _____

   3. Original Phrase:
      "You didn't tell me you were living in a shelter."
   - What this might communicate:
     You should have shared more. Your privacy isn't valid. I need to know everything.
   - What I want to communicate:
     You're safe with me. You never have to prove your need. Your privacy is your right.
   - My Rewrite:
     Example: "Thank you for sharing what you felt ready to. You deserve support whether or not you tell your full story."
     Your version: _____

   4. Original Phrase:
      "There's no excuse for not turning this in."
   - What this might communicate:
     Your life circumstances don't matter. I'm not open to understanding.
   - What I want to communicate:
     I still care about your growth. I want to offer flexibility, not abandon expectations.
   - My Rewrite:
     Example: "Let's talk about what got in the way—maybe we can come up with a new plan together."
     Your version: _____

Closing:

Optional: Create Your Own
Is there a phrase you've said—or heard—that stuck with you for the wrong reason? Try reflecting and rewriting below:
Original Phrase: _____
What this might communicate: _____
What I want to communicate: _____
My Rewrite: _____

Take a moment to reflect on what you've discovered.
- What surprised you about your original language or rewrites?
- How might this shift the way you respond when a student is overwhelmed, withdrawn, or acting out?
- What phrase or tone will you carry with you into your next interaction?
- You might finish by writing a simple language intention statement, such as:
  I want my words to build trust.
  I will pause before I correct.
  I will speak to the dignity of the person, not the difficulty of the moment.

Professional Development: "Holding Stories with Care - A Dignity Forward Understanding"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
To reframe how educators perceive and respond to students experiencing housing insecurity, recognizing it as an experience, not an identity. To equip educators with language and mindset shifts that uphold students' dignity and avoid labels rooted in deficit thinking. To cultivate trauma-informed, asset-based awareness that supports—not saves—students.	Empathy, Compassion, Respect, Humility	This activity is designed to increase educators' awareness of the lived experiences of students navigating unhoused realities, promoting emotional safety, and reducing stigma. It affirms each student's dignity while empowering staff to respond with trust, stability, and humanity.	Adult educators and school staff
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 3: Social Awareness CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills	Optional group output: "What We'll Do Differently Now" commitment wall Post-session self-assessment on personal language/response shifts (e.g., exit slips or digital form)	Printed anonymized postcard narratives (student voices) (See pre-work above) Printed reframes (on back or on flip-side cards) Clipboards or reflection sheets Sticky notes and markers Quiet gallery space or hallway Soft instrumental music (optional) Optional: large paper/poster labeled "What We'll Do Differently Now"	Small group or full staff PD; independent gallery walk with facilitated reflection

Pre-Work

- Before engaging students or educators in a "story gallery" that centers dignity and reframes assumptions, facilitators must take time to prepare content that is trauma-informed, identity-affirming, and contextually relevant. This ensures the activity is grounded in truth, not spectacle, and protects the emotional safety of all participants.

- In preparation, confirm:
    * What types of stories are appropriate to share anonymously
    * Whether your school has protocols for handling emotional distress or student disclosures
    * Whether the activity fits within your community's social-emotional learning or trauma-informed frameworks

- Narratives should be:
    * Rooted in dignity, not shame or spectacle
    * Short and concrete (3–5 sentences max)
    * Reflect strength, struggle, or misunderstanding

- Avoid explicit descriptions of trauma (e.g., do not detail violence, abuse, or family conflict graphically)

- You may choose to use:
    A. Composite Narratives (Recommended)
        - Based on real student experiences shared over time
        - Combined or anonymized to protect identities
        - Reflect common themes across your student body or community
        - Written in first person for emotional proximity (e.g., "I sleep on a couch most nights and still make it to school.")

    B. Educator-Curated Narratives
        - Gathered from classroom observations, listening circles, or anonymous surveys
        - Approved by your leadership or a mental health team before sharing

Steps:

- Facilitator's Note: Please also be aware- this session may stir deep emotions. For some, these stories may mirror their own experiences with instability, abandonment, or grief. Hold space gently. Offer the option to step away, pause, or engage quietly. The goal is never exposure—but reflection and growth rooted in dignity.

1. Welcome & Grounding
    - Open with a quote, breathwork, or poem centering around dignity
    - Introduce the concept: Students experiencing homelessness are not "homeless kids." They are people—students—worthy of love, consistency, and care.

2. Framing
    - Read the dignity statement aloud:
        Dignity is the special value of every human person.
    - Name: We are here to practice seeing our students through a lens of dignity, not through the shadow of their circumstances.
    - If appropriate, say: A student's present housing situation is an experience, not a label or reflection of their worth.
    - Invite participants to sit with that throughout the gallery walk.
    - Gallery Walk
    - Silent walk through 6–10 "postcards" with real or composite student narratives.
    - Participants read, flip, and reflect. Use guiding questions:
        What might this student want us to see?
        What strength is hidden in this story?

3. Small Group Debrief
    Use discussion prompts:
        - Which story challenged an assumption you've held?
        - Which reframe reminded you of a student you know? What reframes stuck with you?
        - How can we ensure students' experiences do not become their identity?
        - What can dignity-based support look like in practice?
        - How can I show students empathy, compassion, respect, humility, etc.?

4. Collective Synthesis (Optional)
    - Contribute to a "What We'll Do Differently Now" wall with sticky notes.
    - Share out a few anonymized insights if time allows.

Closing:

1. Invite participants to choose one reframe and write it down or say it aloud.

2. Affirm the shared goal: "We are not here to save students. We are here to see them. And in seeing them, support them in owning their stories with pride, not shame."

3. Possible extensions:
    - Create Your Own Postcard: Educators write a narrative and reframe based on a student they've supported.
    - Team Charter: Draft a one-sentence commitment to dignity-affirming language (e.g., "We will never describe students by their hardships.")
    - Ongoing Storyboard: Add new postcards each month as part of continued PD or restorative practice.

Handouts:

Participant Note:
As you walk through this story gallery, you may feel a range of emotions—sadness, frustration, admiration, even discomfort. That's okay. These postcards are not meant to evoke pity or guilt. They are meant to reframe how we see our students—not through the shadow of their circumstance, but through the light of their dignity.
We must remember: a student experiencing housing insecurity is not defined by it. Their worth is not diminished by what they lack. Our role is not to label, rescue, or "fix"—it is to support, to notice, and to uphold the wholeness of every child we serve.
Please know that if this session touches a personal wound—whether from childhood, caregiving, or recent experiences—you are not alone. Your presence here, even in quiet reflection, is a brave and meaningful act.

Postcards: These postcard narratives are sample composites—crafted to reflect the voices, choices, and quiet strength of students experiencing housing insecurity. They're intended to build

empathy and help shift our lens from assumptions to understanding. However, the most powerful stories may emerge from your own context. We encourage you, if time and trust allow, to adapt this experience: collect anonymized reflections from your school, create composite narratives from real student insights, or invite staff to reflect on reframes based on their lived experiences with students.

Sample postcards with reframes

Postcard 1:

I wake up every morning in the back seat of a car and still get to school on time. I brush my teeth in the gas station bathroom and keep my shoes clean so no one knows.

Reframe 1:

This student is resourceful and determined—not irresponsible or late. They value learning, structure, and pride in self-presentation. Their experience is hard, but they are not broken.

Postcard 2:

I don't want to go on the field trip. Not because I don't want to—but because I don't have a bag to bring anything in.

Reframe 2:

This student shows courage by showing up every day. We honor their needs by ensuring access without requiring disclosure or shame.

Postcard 3:

I didn't do the homework. I had to hold my little brother all night while my mom worked the overnight shift and we waited at the shelter.

Reframe 3:

This student is practicing care, sacrifice, and maturity far beyond their years. They are not lazy—they are overwhelmed. Our support must reflect that difference.

Postcard 4:

I don't always want to go home. Because I don't know where it is that night.

Reframe 4:

This student deserves predictable safety. They don't need fixing—they need consistency, trust, and care that doesn't require them to earn it.

Postcard 5:

Please don't ask me in front of everyone where I live. I don't want to lie, but I don't want to say it out loud either.

Reframe 5:

This student protects their dignity through silence. Our job is not to expose pain for the sake of policies—it's to create environments where needs are met without needing to explain or defend them.

Divorce

Parental divorce can be a profound source of trauma for children, as it disrupts the most foundational system of safety and stability, the family. While divorce does not always result in long-term harm, its impact depends on factors such as the level of parental conflict, the quality of post-divorce relationships, and the child's developmental stage (Kelly & Emery, 2003). For many children, divorce involves loss, uncertainty, and changes in attachment patterns, which can trigger stress responses similar to other forms of trauma (Amato, 2010).

Cause of Trauma

Divorce represents a major disruption in relationships that can significantly impact a child's sense of stability and connection. The process often exposes children to parental conflict before, during, and after the separation, leaving them vulnerable to arguments, blame, or emotional withdrawal from the adults they depend on most. This tension can overwhelm children, who may feel caught in the middle and responsible for easing their parents' distress. Divorce also disrupts daily routines, as children adjust to moving between households, adapting to new schools, or experiencing changes in friendships and extended family connections. These shifts in stability can leave children feeling unsettled, struggling to find predictability in environments that once felt safe.

Beyond the logistical challenges, divorce frequently stirs deep emotional struggles. Children may experience feelings of abandonment or divided loyalty, particularly if they feel pressure to "choose sides" or take on the role of caretaker for a parent who is hurting. The stress of navigating fractured relationships and shifting responsibilities creates an ongoing state of uncertainty, which undermines a child's ability to self-regulate and trust their environment (Hetherington & Elmore, 2003). Without consistent reassurance and supportive adult relationships, children of divorce may internalize shame, blame themselves for the separation, or develop chronic anxiety about the permanence of relationships. At the same time, with intentional support from both caregivers and schools, children can build resilience, learning that even amidst relational rupture, trust and belonging can be rebuilt through stability, connection, and compassion.

VS Case Study - Divorced Parents

A former 8th grade student of ours wrestled with deep anger toward his father during a difficult divorce. Victory Schools offered him consistent mentorship, particular with male staff and coaches - helping him learn healthier ways to process emotions and channel his energy. We encouraged positive and open communication while guiding both parents on strategies to support their son with patience and understanding. With this partnership, the student grew in resilience, and discovered positive outlets utilizing his strengths.

Effects on Children

Social Impact

When parents separate, children often feel the ripple effects in their friendships. A child may suddenly stop attending birthday parties or after-school activities because weekends and evenings are now divided between households. Others might cling tightly to one best friend for security or, conversely, withdraw from peers altogether, worried about being judged or misunderstood (Lansford, 2009). Moves to a new neighborhood or school can further compound this sense of loss, cutting off access to familiar peers and trusted adults.

Schools can help by creating reliable opportunities for connection that aren't dependent on home schedules. Structured peer buddy systems, cooperative learning projects, and classroom circles can anchor children in consistent relationships. Character education lessons that emphasize empathy and respect also normalize family diversity, reducing the stigma children of divorce sometimes feel.

Emotional Impact

Divorce can deeply unsettle a child's emotional foundation. Some become hypervigilant, monitoring the moods of parents to anticipate conflict, while others may hide their own distress to avoid adding to family tension. Still others may cling more tightly to teachers or friends, fearing additional abandonment (Amato, 2010). These patterns often show up in school as tearfulness, irritability, or emotional outbursts that seem disproportionate but reflect underlying stress.

Educators can buffer these challenges through trauma-informed relational practices. Simple rituals like consistent greetings, a designated safe space in the classroom, or access to a trusted mentor offer children stability. Embedding social-emotional learning (SEL) helps students build a vocabulary for their feelings, while character education focused on compassion and self-worth reassures children that their emotions are valid and manageable.

VS Case Study - Divorced Parents

A high school female student at Victory Schools struggled with the emotional impact of her parents' divorce. She often felt torn between households, which led to anxiety, inconsistent attendance, and difficulty focusing on her coursework. Victory teachers, counselors, and the school's character education program supported her by reinforcing the pillar of integrity. She learned that integrity meant staying true to her values and making honest, responsible choices—both at home and at school—despite the stress of divided family expectations. Through counseling sessions and trusted mentorship, she began to communicate her needs clearly, remain consistent with school commitments, and set healthy boundaries with both parents. Over time, she regained academic stability, built stronger peer relationships, and developed confidence in her own decision-making. Today, she is thriving in the classroom and serves as a role model, showing that integrity can guide students through complex family challenges.

Cognitive Impact

For many children, the mental effort of processing divorce-related changes can crowd out capacity for learning. Worry about schedules, custody arrangements, or parental conflict consumes cognitive resources needed for focus and memory. Research shows that these stressors are linked to declines in academic performance, particularly in tasks requiring sustained attention and problem-solving (Sun & Li, 2009). Teachers may see students who appear distracted, forgetful, or inconsistent in their effort—not due to lack of ability, but because their mental bandwidth is stretched thin.

Schools can ease this cognitive burden by providing scaffolds such as breaking tasks into smaller steps, using visual reminders, and teaching organizational skills explicitly. Trauma-informed teaching that emphasizes predictability and clarity reduces anxiety, while character education lessons on perseverance and growth mindset help students reframe challenges as opportunities to strengthen resilience.

Physical and Neurological/Neurodevelopmental Impact

The stress of divorce often surfaces in the body as well as the mind. Elevated cortisol from family conflict can disrupt sleep, increase somatic complaints such as headaches or stomachaches, and impair self-regulation (Luecken et al., 2013). Younger children, whose neurodevelopmental systems are still forming, are especially vulnerable; they may regress in behaviors like bedwetting or excessive clinginess. Adolescents may present with fatigue, impulsivity, or difficulty calming down in stressful situations. These are not merely "behavioral problems," but physiological signs of stress activation.

Educators can address these needs by embedding regulation strategies into the school day. Mindfulness practices, movement breaks, and sensory tools provide students with outlets to calm their nervous systems. Pairing these with character education lessons on resilience, courage, and self-care reinforces the message that children have the ability to manage stress and restore balance. By offering both practical tools and character-based framing, schools can help students regain a sense of control and safety in their daily lives.

Conclusion

Divorce can be a deeply disruptive experience for children, affecting their social connections, emotional security, cognitive focus, and even physical well-being. While not all children of divorce experience long-term harm, the instability and stress associated with parental separation can heighten vulnerability during critical developmental years. Schools, however, can play a powerful role in buffering these effects. Through trauma-informed practices that provide consistency and predictability, and character education that nurtures empathy, resilience, and belonging, educators can help children navigate the challenges of divorce with greater strength. By surrounding students with caring relationships, reliable routines, and affirmations of their worth, schools become places of healing where children can rebuild trust, maintain hope, and discover that their story is not defined by family rupture but by resilience and growth.

Where to Get Additional Support for Students and Families Experiencing Divorce

School Counselors and Social Workers
Offer direct support and run student groups. Many schools also partner with community counseling services.

The National Family Resiliency Center
Provides resources for children and parents navigating separation and divorce, including books, workshops, and counseling tools. https://www.nfrchelp.org

American Academy of Pediatrics – HealthyChildren.org
Offers guidance for parents on supporting children emotionally, developmentally, and medically through divorce. https://www.healthychildren.org

American Psychological Association (APA)
Features articles and tip sheets on helping children cope with divorce and family transitions. https://www.apa.org/topics/divorce-child-custody

KidsHealth from Nemours
Provides accessible, child-friendly articles and resources that teachers can share with students directly. https://kidshealth.org

Sesame Street in Communities – Divorce
Developmentally appropriate videos, activities, and caregiver guides for young children processing divorce. https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/divorce

Our Family Wizard
A co-parenting tool that helps reduce conflict by supporting structured communication between divorced parents. https://www.ourfamilywizard.com

Activity K-2: “Hands in the Sand”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
To use sensory play with kinetic sand as a calming tool. To help children express feelings about family changes in safe, non-verbal ways. To affirm that they are loved and safe, no matter their family structure. To build simple awareness that feelings can be shared, shaped, and soothed.	Resilience, Hope, Compassion, Trust	This activity reinforces safety, co-regulation, and belonging. Kinetic sand provides a sensory anchor while engaging with difficult emotions. Divorce can stir confusion, sadness, or worry about stability; tactile play allows children to explore these feelings without pressure to talk.	Grades K–2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 2: Self-Management CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills	Observed ability to identify emotions and sources of connection. Verbal or creative expression of emotion through art or discussion.	Tray, open container, or playmat, like a placemat Kinetic sand	Individual with adult facilitator

Steps:

- Facilitator’s Note: Divorce-related trauma may include fear of separation, uncertainty, or grief. Be sure this lesson is scaffolded with wellness supports and check-ins. Before delivering this activity, please ensure you have gained approval or consultation from your school’s counseling department and/or leadership team. Engaging in trauma-informed dialogue with children is meaningful work, and it must be done with safeguards in place, clear follow-up plans, and alignment with your school’s broader wellness supports.

- After the session, consider checking in with your mental health team or school social worker to share any observations or to debrief supportively.

1. Welcome and Opening (2–3 minutes)

    - Invite the child to sit with their tray of kinetic sand.
    - Invite the child to place both hands in the sand.
    - Prompt and model breathing technique:
        Let’s take three big breaths together. Each time you breathe in, squeeze the sand. Each time you breathe out, let it go.

2. Exercise 1 (4–5 minutes)

    - Prompt and model exercise 1:
        Use the sand to make a shape that shows how you feel today. It could be a ball, a mountain, a heart, or something only you know.
    - Invite sharing: Can you tell me about your shape?

3. Exercise 2 (6–7 minutes)

    - Prompt and model exercise 2:
        Now use the sand to build something that helps you feel safe or loved. It could be a house, a hug, a sun, or anything you want.
        Encourage the child to gently press their handprint into the sand as a symbol of belonging.
        Optional share aloud: “This is your special mark—just like your heart, it shows you belong.”

Closing:

1. Smooth the sand back into a flat surface together.

2. Make an aloud connection
    i.e., Just like the sand can change shapes, our feelings can change too. Relate connections to specific character traits such as resilience, hope, compassion, trust, etc.

3. Close by providing a short affirmation: I.e., You are safe. You are loved.

Activity K-2: “Leaf Prints”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
To use a creative, sensory art activity as a calming tool. To help children symbolically express feelings of connection, love, and stability. To affirm that just like leaves are part of a strong tree, children are rooted in dignity and belonging. To encourage children to connect their artwork to someone or something that makes them feel loved.	Resilience, Self-Awareness, Hope, Compassion, Trust	This activity reinforces safety and relational connection. Divorce can make children feel unstable or “uprooted.” Using a leaf as a symbol of belonging to something bigger (a tree, a family, a community) helps children reframe their experience through strength and continuity. The predictable rhythm of rubbing and creating provides calming regulation, while the act of naming someone who makes them feel loved restores a sense of connection and dignity.	Grades K–2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 2: Self-Management CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills	Observed ability to identify emotions and sources of connection. Verbal or creative expression of emotion through art or discussion.	Paper Multiple leaves to choose from (real or imitation/fabric) Crayons	Individual or small group with adult facilitator

Steps:

- Facilitator’s Note: Divorce-related trauma may include fear of separation, uncertainty, or grief. Be sure this lesson is scaffolded with wellness supports and check-ins. Before delivering this activity, please ensure you have gained approval or consultation from your school’s counseling department and/or leadership team. Engaging in trauma-informed dialogue with children is meaningful work, and it must be done with safeguards in place, clear follow-up plans, and alignment with your school’s broader wellness supports. After the session, consider checking in with your mental health team or school social worker to share any observations or to debrief supportively.

1. Welcome and Opening (2–3 minutes)

    - Give each child a leaf, paper, and crayons.
    - If possible, provide an opportunity to choose a leaf and crayon color(s). (Practicing choice and agency).
    - Prompt and model breathing technique:
        Let’s take three slow breaths. As we breathe, hold your leaf and notice how it feels in your hand.

2. Leaf Rubbing (5 minutes)

    - Model and then allow the child to: Place the leaf under the paper.
    - Show: “Now take your crayon and rub gently on top. Watch the lines and shapes appear.”
    - Allow the child to make 1–3 rubbings, choosing different colors if desired.

3. Connection (4-5 minutes)

    - Name: Each leaf is part of a tree, just like you are part of a family and community. Even if families change, love stays.
    - Invite the child to write (or dictate for the adult to write) the name of someone who helps them feel safe or loved on their leaf rubbing.
    - Optional: Add a heart or color around that person’s name.

Closing:

1. Display the art in a prominent place.

2. Make an aloud connection
   i.e., These leaves remind us that we belong. Families can change, but your roots of love and dignity always stay strong. Relate connections to character traits such as resilience, hope, compassion, trust, etc.

3. Close by providing a short affirmation
   I.e., I/you/we am rooted. I/you/we am loved. I/you/we belong.

Activity K-2: "My Circle of Caring – Knowing Who Helps Me Feel Safe"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	**Character Traits Targeted:**	**Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:**	**Age Range:**
Students will identify people who help them feel safe and cared for, recognize their own positive qualities, and understand that they are valued no matter what family changes happen.	Trustworthiness, Empathy, Gratitude	Provides a predictable, nurturing structure for talking about feelings, avoids judgment or pressure to share personal details, uses positive affirmations, and normalizes all family situations.	Grades K–2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness & Relationship Skills – Recognizing personal support systems and expressing gratitude	Observation of participation in discussion and completion of "My Circle of Caring" worksheet	Read-aloud book about belonging and support (ex. The Invisible String by Patrice Karst, A Family is a Family is a Family by Sara O'Leary, or similar) "My Circle of Caring" worksheet (center circle for self, surrounding circles for supportive people) Crayons, markers, or colored pencils	Classroom or small group Whole group read-aloud, individual drawing/ writing, optional partner sharing

Steps:

1. Warm-Up Discussion:
   Gather students and say: "Everyone has people who care about them and help them feel safe — at home, at school, or in the community. Today we're going to think about the people who help us feel cared for."

Activity 1 – Read-Aloud Connection:

- Read the selected story.
- Ask: Who helped the main character feel cared for in the story? How did they show it?

Activity 2 – Brainstorm Caring Actions:

- On chart paper, make a list of ways people can show they care (examples: listening, giving a hug, playing a game, helping with work).

Activity 3 – My Circle of Caring Worksheet:

- In the center circle, students draw a picture of themselves.
- In each surrounding circle, they draw or write the name of someone who helps them feel cared for or that they have gratitude for (family, friends, teachers, neighbors, etc.).
- Encourage students to include school-based supports as well as home or community ones.

Activity 4 – Optional Partner Sharing:

- Students can share one person from their circle with a partner and say how that person helps them.

Closing:

Closing reminder:

- You are cared for by many people.
- It's okay to ask for help when you need it.
- The people in your circle want you to feel safe and happy.

Extension: Create a class "Circle of Caring" wall where each student adds one picture of someone who helps them feel safe, or that they can trust.

Handouts:

My_Circle_of_Caring_Worksheet.pdf

Activity 3-5: "Shaping Space"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
To provide a safe, calming sensory experience that helps children regulate emotions connected to family changes. To help children externalize feelings about divorce in a symbolic, non-verbal way. To encourage children to name what helps them feel safe, loved, and connected. To affirm their identity and worth, reminding them that they are more than their family circumstances.	Resilience, Hope, Empathy, Trustworthiness	This activity reinforces safety, and self-expression. Tactile play with kinetic sand provides regulation for children navigating uncertainty or loss. Divorce can stir feelings of instability, guilt, or shame — this activity affirms that emotions are valid.	Grades 3-5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 2: Self-Management CASEL Core 3: Social Awareness CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills	Observed ability to identify emotions and sources of connection. Verbal or creative expression of emotion through art or discussion.	Tray, open container, or playmat, like a placemat Kinetic sand	Individual with adult facilitator

Steps:

- Facilitator's Note: Divorce-related trauma may include fear of separation, uncertainty, or grief. Be sure this lesson is scaffolded with wellness supports and check-ins. Before delivering this activity, please ensure you have gained approval or consultation from your school's counseling department and/or leadership team. Engaging in trauma-informed dialogue with children is meaningful work, and it must be done with safeguards in place, clear follow-up plans, and alignment with your school's broader wellness supports. After the session, consider checking in with your mental health team or school social worker to share any observations or to debrief supportively.

1. Welcome and Opening (2–3 minutes)
   - Invite the child to sit with their tray of kinetic sand.
   - Prompt and model a breathing technique: *Take three slow breaths. Each time you breathe out, let your hands sink into the sand. Notice how it feels — soft, squishy, steady.*

2. Exercise 1 (6–7 minutes)
   - Prompt and model exercise 1:*Use the sand to make a shape that shows how you feel about your family right now. It could be one shape or many. There's no right or wrong answer.*
   - Optional reflection question: What does this shape tell you about your feelings?

3. Exercise 2 (6–7 minutes)
   - Prompt and model exercise 2: *Now use the sand to build something that makes you feel safe or loved — it could be a house, a heart, a mountain, or something only you understand.*
   - Encourage the child to gently press their handprint into the sand as a symbol of belonging.
   - Optional share aloud: "This is what makes me feel safe."

Closing:

1. Smooth the sand back into a flat surface together.
2. Make an aloud connection
   i.e., Just like the sand can always be reshaped, your feelings can change, too. No matter what, you are whole and loved. Connect to character traits such as resilience, hope, empathy, etc. as appropriate.
3. Invite (and model) the child to consider or speak a short affirmation
   i.e., I am safe. I am loved.

Activity 3-5: “Two Homes, One Me – Recognizing Strength and Stability Within”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	**Character Traits Targeted:**	**Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:**	**Age Range:**
Students will identify emotions related to family changes, learn strategies to manage these emotions, and affirm their identity and worth regardless of family structure.	Self-awareness, Empathy, Resilience	Creates a safe space for optional sharing, validates all family structures, avoids judgmental language, and uses a strengths-based approach to reinforce student confidence.	Grades 3-6
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competency: Self-Management & Self-Awareness – Identifying emotions and using strategies to manage	Completion of the “My Strength in Two Places” worksheet, participation in discussion, and observed use of coping strategies.	“My Strength in Two Places” worksheet (two overlapping circles for strengths/supports in different home environments, with shared space for personal qualities that stay the same) Chart paper or board for group brainstorm of positive coping strategies Markers, crayons, or colored pencils	classroom or small group setting whole group introduction, individual reflection, optional partner share

Steps:

1. Warm-Up Discussion:

    - Ask: “Have you ever had to spend time in more than one place — like visiting family in two different towns or staying at a friend’s house? How can that feel?” This promotes self-awareness.
    - Acknowledge mixed emotions and normalize differences in family situations, with empathy in mind.

2. Activity 1 – Coping Strategy Brainstorm:

    - As a class, brainstorm ways people can take care of themselves during big changes (e.g., talking to someone, drawing, exercise, keeping a special routine).
    - Write them on the board.

3. Activity 2 – My Strength in Two Places Worksheet:

    - In the left circle, students write or draw things that help them feel strong, supported, or happy in one home.
    - In the right circle, they do the same for the other home or living situation.
    - In the middle overlap, they list personal qualities and strengths that stay the same no matter where they are (e.g., kindness, creativity, resilience, sense of humor).

4. Activity 3 – Optional Sharing:

    - Students can share one item from the overlap section with a partner.
    - Partners respond with affirmations (e.g., “That’s a great strength” or “I see that in you too”).

5. Activity 4 – Class Reflection:

    - Discuss how personal qualities are part of who we are and can help us through changes.

Closing:

Closing reminder:

- Family changes don’t change your value or identity.
- You have strengths that stay with you no matter where you are.
- Using healthy coping strategies can help you feel steady through transitions.

Extension: Students create a “Strength Card” to keep in their backpack — a small card with one coping strategy and one personal quality they can use when feeling unsettled.

Handouts:

My_Strength_in_Two_Places_Worksheet.pdf

Activity 6-8: "The Bridge Between – Communicating Across Change"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	**Character Traits Targeted:**	**Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:**	**Age Range:**
Students will learn communication strategies that help them navigate changes at home, practice expressing needs respectfully, and reflect on personal strengths that help them adapt.	Empathy, Problem-solving	Provides structure for practicing safe, respectful communication; validates varied feelings and perspectives; and emphasizes student agency in expressing needs without pressure to share private details.	Grades 6-8
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competency: Relationship Skills – Communicating clearly, listening actively, and negotiating conflict constructively	Observation of participation in role-plays, completion of "My Bridge Plan" worksheet, and student self-reflection on communication strategies learned.	"My Bridge Plan" worksheet (bridge graphic with three sections: My Need, My Words, My Support) List of sentence starters for expressing needs (e.g., "I feel ___ when ___ because ___. I would like ___.") Chart paper and markers for group brainstorm of communication do's and don'ts	whole group discussion, individual reflection, and partner practice activity

Steps:

1. Warm-Up Discussion:
   - Ask: "When you need help or want to share how you feel, what makes it easier to speak up?"
   - Record answers on chart paper and connect them to respectful, clear communication.

2. Activity 1 – Communication Do's and Don'ts:
   - As a class, brainstorm a list of positive communication habits (making eye contact, using calm tone) and things that make communication harder (interrupting, shouting, assuming).

3. Activity 2 – My Bridge Plan Worksheet:
   - Distribute the worksheet.
   - Students choose one need they might want to communicate to a parent, teacher, or friend (can be real or hypothetical).
   - Fill out:
     * My Need – the specific thing they want or the feeling they want understood
     * My Words – how they could express this respectfully using sentence starters
     * My Support – a person or resource that could help them communicate effectively

4. Activity 3 – Partner Practice:
   - In pairs, students role-play communicating their "My Bridge Plan" scenario.
   - Partners practice listening without interrupting and summarizing what they heard, showing the skill of problem solving.

5. Activity 4 – Group Reflection:
   Discuss:
   - How did it feel to speak up?
   - What helped you feel heard?
   - How can these skills help you when things in life feel uncertain or stressful?

Closing:

Closing reminder:
- Communicating your needs clearly is a skill that can be learned and practiced.
- You have a right to be heard respectfully.
- Building "bridges" in communication strengthens relationships and support systems while demonstrating empathy

Extension: Create a classroom "Bridge Words" poster with sentence starters for respectful communication to keep visible year-round.

Handouts:

My_Bridge_Plan_Worksheet.pdf

Activity 9-12: “My Anchor in the Storm – Finding Stability Through Change”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will identify personal anchors (values, strengths, and supports) that help them navigate life changes, reflect on how divorce or other transitions have shaped their perspective, and explore strategies for self-care and relationship-building.	Resilience, Empathy	Provides space for optional self-disclosure, focuses on strengths rather than deficits, validates a variety of emotional responses to family change, and encourages building a trusted support network.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competency: Self-Management & Relationship Skills – Managing emotions and building supportive relationships	Completion of “My Anchor Map” worksheet, engagement in reflection and discussion, and demonstration of insight into personal coping strategies.	“My Anchor Map” worksheet (center space for self, surrounding sections for values, strengths, coping strategies, and supportive people) Chart paper or whiteboard for brainstorming coping strategies and support networks Optional: calming music or quiet reflection space	whole group intro, individual reflection, partner or small group discussion (optional)

Steps:

1. Warm-Up Discussion:
   - Ask: “When things feel uncertain or overwhelming, what helps you feel steady?”
   - Share examples like trusted friends, personal values, routines, hobbies, or faith.
   - Explain that these are anchors — things that keep us grounded during life’s storms.

2. Activity 1 – Coping & Support Brainstorm:
   - As a group, brainstorm healthy coping strategies and sources of support (both people and activities).
   - Write these on the board to inspire students’ individual work.

3. Activity 2 – My Anchor Map Worksheet:
   Students fill out their personal anchor map:
   - **Center**: Write their name or draw a symbol representing themselves.
   - **Top Section**: Personal values that guide their decisions.
   - **Right Section**: Strengths and skills they possess.
   - **Bottom Section**: Healthy coping strategies they can use during stressful times.
   - **Left Section**: People or communities who provide support.

4. Activity 3 – Optional Sharing:
   - In pairs or small groups, students can share one section of their map they feel comfortable discussing.
   - Listeners respond with affirmations or suggestions.

5. Activity 4 – Reflection:
   Students write a short paragraph:
   - One way I can use my anchors this month to help me stay steady is.....
   - I can lean on resilience and empathy by....

Closing:

Closing reminder:
- Change can be challenging, but knowing your anchors helps you navigate it.
- Divorce and other family changes do not define you — your strengths and values are always with you.
- Reaching out for support is a sign of strength.

Extension: Post anonymous “anchor” words or drawings on a classroom bulletin board to create a visual reminder of stability for all students.

Handouts:

My_Anchor_Map_Worksheet.pdf

Professional Development: "Bridging the Gap – Supporting Students Impacted by Divorce"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Educators will understand the potential academic, social, and emotional impacts of divorce on students, identify trauma-informed strategies to provide stability and connection, and integrate character education practices to help students build resilience and belonging.	Empathy, Compassion, Resilience, Respect	Recognizes divorce as a potentially destabilizing life change, emphasizes the importance of consistency and predictability in school, validates student feelings, and focuses on building safe, trusting relationships.	Professional Development for Teachers and School Staff
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competency: Social Awareness & Relationship Skills – Understanding and responding with empathy to others' experiences Learning for Justice Social Justice Standards: Diversity & Action – Recognizing and affirming varied family structures	Participation in discussions, contributions to strategy development, completion of "Stability Strategies Map" handout.	Short video clip or first-person account from a student or adult reflecting on their school experience during/after divorce Examples: Change the Way You Look at Change | Eric Samuel | TEDxYouth@ESRM My life with divorced parents | Lauren Wade | James River High School "Stability Strategies Map" handout (three sections: Emotional Support, Academic Support, Communication & Coordination) Chart paper, markers, sticky notes	whole group discussion with small group strategy work

Steps:

1. Welcome & Framing (5 minutes)
   - Share: "Divorce can be a life-changing event for a child. As educators, we can't control what happens outside of school, but we can create a predictable, safe, and affirming environment that supports students' well-being and learning."
   - Norms: Confidentiality, nonjudgment, focus on strengths.

2. Activity 1 – Story Connection (10 minutes)
   - Show or read the selected student/adult reflection.
   - Ask participants to jot down:
     * Challenges the student faced
     * School-based supports that could have helped them feel safe and valued

3. Activity 2 – Impact Brainstorm (10 minutes)
   - On chart paper, label three columns: Emotional, Academic, Social.
   - As a group, list possible effects of divorce in each category (e.g., changes in mood, difficulty concentrating, social withdrawal).
   - Keep language neutral and avoid assumptions.

4. Activity 3 – Stability Strategies Map (20 minutes)
   - Distribute the "Stability Strategies Map" handout.
   - In small groups, brainstorm strategies for each section:
     * Emotional Support – ways to affirm, listen, and provide a safe outlet for feelings
     * Academic Support – flexibility, organization tools, check-ins
     * Communication & Coordination – consistent information sharing, respecting privacy, supporting transitions between households
     * Encourage trauma-informed and character-focused approaches (e.g., empathy, resilience, compassion-building activities, predictable classroom routines).

5. Activity 4 – Share & Synthesize (10 minutes)
   - Each group shares one high-impact strategy per section.
   - Facilitator compiles into a master "Bridging the Gap Toolkit" to distribute post-session.

Closing:

Closing reminder:
- Students from divorced families need consistency and trust at school.
- Our role is to be a stabilizing, encouraging presence.
- Character education — especially empathy and respect — helps strengthen the classroom community for all family situations.

Extension: Review school policies and communication practices to ensure they are inclusive and supportive of varied family structures.

Handouts:

Stability_Strategies_Map_Worksheet.pdf

Domestic Violence

Domestic violence is a serious risk to the lives of those impacted, as evidenced by even a simple internet search for information. The National Domestic Violence Hotline has a landing page that states in part, "Security Alert. Internet usage can be monitored and is impossible to erase completely." (National Domestic Violence Hotline, n.d.). Following entry into the site, they have built-in quick exit information and highlighted, large exit buttons. Every resource page cited for this written work contained the same warnings. These measures stress the danger of simply looking for help if you are in a relationship characterized by domestic violence.

Domestic violence, sometimes also called intimate partner violence, is abusive behavior that occurs within a relationship between intimate partners, and carries the intent of power and control (CDC, n.d.; National Domestic Violence Hotline, n.d.). Domestic violence has several definitions, but for the purpose of this writing we will consider the most broad definition. Abusive behavior in a relationship can look like any and all of the following behaviors: violence that is physical or sexual, emotional abuse, stalking, injury or threats of injury to pets, financial exploitation and manipulation, sabotage of birth control, forced usage of alcohol and/or controlled substances, and blocking the victim from attending school, doctor's appointments, etc. (National Domestic Violence Hotline, n.d.). According to the CDC (n.d.), intimate partner violence impacts approximately 41% of women and 26% of men in the United States.

The number of children exposed to domestic violence is difficult to measure for several reasons. Domestic violence is defined in different ways depending on the reporting agency, for example, judicial systems focus more on aggravated domestic violence, which only includes only the physical mechanism of abuse (Piquero & Wheeler, 2024). Domestic violence in general continues to be underreported, in part because there are multiple pathways for reporting, such as education, healthcare, and law enforcement professionals (Piquero & Wheeler, 2024). Inter-agency communication, HIPPA, FERPA, and other legal privacy protections makes information difficult to share (Piquero & Wheeler, 2024). Using the broadest definition, estimates of children experiencing domestic violence can land anywhere between 3.3 million to 10 million in the United States (Domestic Violence Services Network, 2024). These numbers equate to approximately 1 in 3 children who experience domestic violence in the United States before turning 18.

Effects on children

Social Impact

Depending on the age of the child, the social impact of domestic violence can vary. Younger children tend to internalize their feelings, as they lack the verbal acuity to express themselves and their feelings. In younger children, the social impact of domestic violence can look more behavioral and regressive, whereas older children may externalize their feelings through withdrawal from social activities and networks, avoidance of peers, and defiant behavior towards adults (American Academy of Experts in Traumatic Stress, n.d.). Any child who experiences domestic violence can struggle with issues of social-emotional intelligence, such as reading social cues, and understanding and expressing empathy towards others, which can lead to further social isolation (Connections for Abused Women and their Children, 2024).

VS Case Study - Domestic Violence

A second-grade student showed disruptive behavior and sudden mood swings after witnessing domestic violence at home. The trauma left him easily angered, and he often acted out during transitions in class. Victory teachers focused on building the character pillar of self-discipline through structured routines and calm-down strategies. With support, the student learned breathing techniques, the use of a "safe corner," and how to pause before reacting. He set personal goals, like keeping his hands to himself and using words instead of anger. Over time, he grew proud of his ability to control his emotions and celebrated his progress with his teachers. By spring, his behavior incidents dropped significantly, and he demonstrated leadership in modeling self-discipline for peers. The student began to rebuild trust in himself and others, showing that even through trauma, growth was possible.

Schools can support students experiencing the social impacts of domestic violence trauma by implementing trauma-informed and developmentally appropriate strategies that address both younger and older children's needs. For younger children who may regress behaviorally or struggle to express feelings, schools can provide structured routines, predictable classroom environments, and play-based or art-based interventions to help them process emotions safely. Teaching skills like recognizing emotions, understanding social cues, and practicing empathy can benefit children across all ages, particularly those with disrupted social development. For older students who may withdraw or display defiant behavior, educators can build strong, trusting relationships through consistent check-ins, mentoring programs, and peer support opportunities, while ensuring discipline approaches are restorative rather than punitive. Creating safe spaces, such as calm-down areas or access to school counselors, helps students regulate emotions and feel supported. Additionally, schools can strengthen connectedness through character education, cooperative learning projects, and extracurricular activities that promote belonging and positive peer relationships, while maintaining strong partnerships with families and community-based agencies specializing in domestic violence support. These strategies provide students with opportunities to rebuild social confidence, practice healthy relationship skills, and develop resilience within a caring school environment.

Emotional Impact

Exposure to domestic violence has been found to contribute to insecure attachments between children and their caregivers (Noonan & Pilkington, 2020). Attachment theory describes these relationships as "caregiving systems"; in infancy and young childhood children are extremely dependent on caregivers, and rely heavily on their needs being consistently and appropriately met (Mazza et al., 2021; Noonan & Pilkington, 2020). Witnessing caregiver abuse can undermine a child's confidence that their caregiver will meet their needs and keep them safe, effectively threatening the parent's caregiving system, to which a child can react by becoming withdrawn, fearful, and/or anxious towards caregivers (Noonan & Pilkington, 2020). Within classrooms, children can demonstrate the consequences of insecure caregiver attachment as unsafe behavior, such as trusting too quickly or not at all, showing a lack of empathy towards people and pets, stealing, lying, hoarding food and supplies, struggling with eye contact, frequent toileting issues such as refusal or wetting/soiling, and difficulty with flexibility (Attachment & Trauma Network, n.d.).

VS Case Study - Domestic Violence

An eleventh-grade girl at Victory Schools carried the heavy emotional toll of living in a home impacted by domestic violence. The fear and instability made her hesitant to trust adults and initially caused her to retreat from both academics and friendships. Victory's character education program emphasized the pillar of courage, helping her recognize that seeking help and speaking openly were acts of strength. With support from school counselors and trusted teachers, she began to share her experiences, participate in peer mentoring groups, and set academic and personal goals for her future. Each courageous step—whether attending counseling sessions or joining class discussions—helped her rebuild confidence and reclaim a sense of safety. By the end of the year, she emerged as a resilient leader in her school community, demonstrating that courage can transform fear into empowerment.

Schools can play a vital role in supporting students whose insecure attachments stem from exposure to domestic violence by implementing trauma-informed and character-focused practices that provide stability, safety, and connection. Teachers and staff can intentionally model consistent, predictable, and nurturing relationships, which help counteract a child's disrupted sense of trust in caregivers (Noonan & Pilkington, 2020). For example, maintaining structured classroom routines, clear expectations, and gentle transitions fosters a sense of reliability and safety. Staff can use relational strategies such as greeting students by name, offering choices to build agency, and using restorative practices instead of punitive discipline to rebuild trust and teach empathy. Schools can also create calm, sensory-friendly spaces where children can regulate emotions without shame, and integrate social-emotional learning (SEL) activities that develop skills such as perspective-taking, cooperation, and self-awareness. Practical strategies include teaching mindfulness or grounding techniques for anxiety, providing access to school counselors trained in trauma, and connecting families to external mental health and social services. Character education can be embedded by emphasizing virtues like empathy, kindness, and responsibility, reinforced through role-play, service learning, and class discussions. These approaches help children not only feel safe but also gradually internalize healthier relational patterns, increasing their capacity to trust, connect, and thrive despite early attachment disruptions.

Cognitive Impact

How domestic violence impacts the developing brain is a question that is complicated and difficult to study, due to the many issues that have previously been discussed in this writing. What is known is that children who are exposed to domestic violence show an average 8-point decrease in IQ, as well as impacted working memory and verbal abilities (Mueller & Tronick, 2019). Cortisol, the stress hormone, is mitigated by a secure caregiver relationship, and aggravated by an insecure caregiver relationship (Mueller & Tronick, 2019). Studies have explored the relationship between high levels of cortisol and decreased brain activity and even cell death in areas of the brain related to memory (Mueller & Tronich, 2019). What can be inferred from this research as it applies to the classroom setting, is that children who have experienced exposure to domestic violence have neurochemical deficits that can make them more complicated to teach, and therefore at risk of entering the school system behind, and continuing to fall further behind without targeted interventions.

Schools can support students experiencing the cognitive and attachment-related impacts of domestic violence through targeted, trauma-informed, and relationship-centered practices. Teachers and staff can intentionally build safe, predictable classroom environments that help foster a sense of trust and stability, which counteracts insecure attachments. Consistent routines, clear expectations, and calm responses to behavior challenges can reduce stress and support emotional regulation. Given the cognitive impacts such as reduced IQ, working memory difficulties, and verbal deficits, schools can implement evidence-based interventions like explicit instruction, scaffolded learning tasks, and multisensory teaching strategies that reduce cognitive load. Embedding social-emotional learning (SEL) into the curriculum can provide students with opportunities to develop self-awareness, resilience, and coping strategies, while also teaching empathy and relational skills. Partnering students with supportive adults through mentoring programs or check-ins can strengthen secure relationships that buffer the effects of toxic stress and help stabilize cortisol levels. Additionally, schools can collaborate with counselors, school psychologists, and outside agencies to provide access to mental health services and family support by emphasizing virtues like perseverance, empathy, and self-control, schools can create protective factors that not only address academic gaps but also nurture whole-person development for students who have experienced domestic violence.

Physical Impact

The most immediate physical threat to children who are experiencing domestic violence is physical abuse of the child by the perpetrator. Research has found that the rates of co-occurrence of domestic violence and child abuse to be from 40-60% in community samples (Resource Center on Domestic Violence, n.d.). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2024) defines types of child abuse as physical, sexual, emotional, or neglect. The attached fact sheet gives a more detailed explanation of signs of different types of abuse; it is imperative that teachers are able to recognize these signs and report them promptly to the proper authorities. In general, teachers should watch for unexplained injuries, changes in behavior/grades, frequent absences, hoarding/stealing resources, unclean/inappropriate clothing for the weather, struggles walking or sitting, inappropriate sexual knowledge/behavior, regression/loss of skills (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019).

Schools play a critical role in protecting and supporting students who may be experiencing domestic violence and associated child abuse. First and foremost, educators must be trained to recognize the warning signs of abuse, such as unexplained injuries, drastic changes in behavior or academic performance, frequent absences, or regression in skills, and follow mandated reporting procedures with urgency and accuracy. Beyond reporting, schools can create safe and supportive environments through trauma-informed practices, such as predictable routines, calm and caring interactions, and designated safe spaces where students can regulate their emotions. Practical strategies include providing access to school counselors, social workers, or trauma specialists who can offer both immediate support and connections to external agencies. Teachers can also discreetly ensure basic needs are met by collaborating with school nutrition programs, clothing drives, or resource partnerships to address food insecurity and inadequate clothing. Fostering empathy, resilience, and trust can help students rebuild a sense of safety and belonging while countering the isolation and fear often linked to abuse. Finally, staff collaboration with families, when safe and appropriate, and with local domestic violence shelters or child advocacy centers ensures that students receive a comprehensive network of care and protection.

Where to Get Additional Support

National Domestic Violence Hotline
Website & chat: https://www.thehotline.org/ The Hotline
Call: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233) (24/7) The Hotline
Text: "START" to 88788 The Hotline

National Network to End Domestic Violence (NNEDV)
https://nnedv.org/ — A national network of state and territorial domestic violence coalitions; includes toolkits, policy work, and resource directories. NNEDV

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (NCADV)
https://ncadv.org/ — Advocacy, awareness, and support work. NCADV

RAINN (Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network)
https://www.rainn.org/
Particularly focused on sexual violence, but helpful resources and referrals for survivors.

Tahirih Justice Center
https://www.tahirih.org/
Offers legal and social support services, especially for immigrant women and girls fleeing gender-based violence.

Arizona – Arizona Coalition to End Sexual and Domestic Violence
Lists local services, provides a 24-hour domestic violence hotline in AZ. Arizona Department of Economic Security https://des.az.gov/domestic-violence

Sanctuary for Families (New York)
Offers legal assistance, counseling, shelter, and advocacy for survivors of domestic violence and gender-based violence. https://sanctuaryforfamilies.org

The Salvation Army – Domestic Violence Programs
Offers emergency and transitional shelter, counseling, and supports for families fleeing domestic violence. The Salvation Army USA https://salvationarmyusa.org

CARE Family Violence Program (Cumberland County, NC)
Example of a county-level program with shelter, crisis line, legal information and counseling. Cumberland County NC https://www.cumberlandcountync.gov

The Shade Tree (Nevada)
A nonprofit providing shelter and support for women, children, and pets affected by domestic violence.

House of Ruth (Washington, DC area)
Provides housing, counseling, outreach, and support services for survivors and their children.

Activity K-2: "Feel Better Breathing"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will be able to describe one reason we might use "feel better breathing." Students will be able to demonstrate at least one breathing strategy.	Resilience, Perseverance, Courage	Supports sense of individual safety, and provides choice and empowerment for individual coping and resilience	Grades K–2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness, Self-Management American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SMS 1. Responsibility for self and actions ASCA B-SMS 2. Self-discipline and self-control ASCA B-SMS 7. Effective coping skills	Students will be able to describe one reason we might use "feel better breathing." Students will be able to demonstrate at least one breathing strategy.	Breathing Cards - https://littlewarriors.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Mindful-Breathing-Cards.pdf (Little Warriors, 2023)	Individual Activity Small Groups Whole Group

Steps:

1 - Hook

- Have students stand up and run in place for 1 minute.
- Immediately following this, show them how to feel their heart or their pulse and ask them what they feel happening in their bodies (fast heart beat, pulse is high, body is tense, etc.).

2 - Discussion

-Talk about sometimes when we are scared, worried or afraid, our bodies will move fast like this even without us running or moving! It often has a "yucky" feeling, too, because of our big feelings.
- Sometimes when we feel scared or worried, we might notice it in our bodies.
- On the board list some things they might notice:
  - Fast heart beat
  - Clammy hands
  - Tummy ache
  - Tense muscles
  - Stiff body
  - Fast and quick breath or having a hard time catch your breath
- Ask students if they would be interested in learning how to help their bodies calm down when they are feeling really fast and yucky?

3 - Explain the concept:

- Talk about how sometimes when we are scared and we feel it in our bodies, before we can think about what to do, we sometimes have to help our body calm down. We do this through "feel better breathing."
- "Feel better breathing" helps our bodies in a few ways:
  - 1 - helps our body calm down (heart and breath)
  - 2 - helps our brain to think
  - 3 - helps our big feelings to start to shrink

- There are many ways to breathe to help you feel better.
- Tell students we will learn some ways to "breathe to feel better" today, using courage and perseverance. .

4 - Practice Breathing

- Have breathing cards hidden around the classroom
- Have individuals, pairs or groups find cards
- Come back together and go through some of the breathing exercises together (you will likely continue this lesson over days/weeks to slowly learn all the breathing techniques and review over time)
- Have students practice different breathing exercises and comments on what they like, don't like, how it makes them feel, etc.

5 - Feel Better Breathing Test!

- Have students pick one of their favorite breathing exercises.
- Let them know that they will use this to see if it helps their body to calm down.
- Have students run in place for 1 minute as they did at the first of the lesson
- Immediately following the 1 minute, again have students feel their heartbeat or their heart rate and have them notice how they feel in their body - highlight how fast their heart is going and how quick their breath is.
- Then, have students do their selected breathing exercise 2-3 times.
- Have the students check their heart rate and their breathing again.
- What did they notice?
- Did they notice that their body was calming (heart was able to slow down and breathing slowed down)?
- Did they notice their brain could think more clearly?
- Did they notice any big feelings start to shrink?
- Did they notice how resilient they are?

Closing:

- Discuss with students how sometimes there are difficult things that make us feel scared, worried or angry.

When we notice our body is feeling yucky, we can practice "feel better breathing" to help us calm down and feel safer.

- Have students name one reason "feel better breathing" can help us feel better (calms our body (heart and breath), calms our brain, shrinks big feelings). Have students name one breathing strategy they will try to use next time they notice their body needs to feel better.

- Extension:

In the classroom library or during reading times, provide the following titles to support ongoing discussion and practice with breathing:

"Alphabreaths: The ABCs of Mindful Breathing" by Christopher Willard, PsyD & Daniel Rechtschaffen, MA
"Breathe Like a Bear" by Kira Willey
"My Breath" by Orlanda Bettison
"Breathe with Me: Using Breath to Feel Strong, Calm, and Happy" by Mariam Gates
"My Magic Breath: Finding Calm Through Mindful Breathing" by Nick Ortner and Alison Taylor
"1-2-3, A Deep Breath for Me" by Hillary Harper

Possibly use the breathing cards in centers, for morning meetings or in routine to continue practicing and reminding students of these coping skills.

Handouts:

Breathing Cards - https://littlewarriors.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/Mindful-Breathing-Cards.pdf (Little Warriors, 2023)

Activity K-5: “Learning to Tap”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will be able to follow a tapping sequence as a coping skill for negative emotion.	Resilience, Perseverance, Courage	Supports sense of individual safety, and provides choice and empowerment for individual coping and resilience	Grades K–5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness, Self-Management American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SMS 1. Responsibility for self and actions ASCA B-SMS 2. Self-discipline and self-control ASCA B-SMS 7. Effective coping skills	Students will demonstrate the use of one tapping sequence.	Tapping diagrams - https://www.tappingsolutionfoundation.org/tapping-diagrams/	Individual

Steps:

1 - Hook

- Read the different scenarios below to the student and have them show on their face and in their bodies how it might make them feel (you can create scenarios that are similar to the child’s context if appropriate):
    * Your sister just took your favorite stuffy and accidentally dropped it in the mud!
    * You get to go with your best friend to your favorite jump gym.
    * Your Mom and Dad are fighting and their voices are loud.
    * Your dog comes and licks your face when you come home from school.
    * Your Mom is really sad and won’t stop crying but you don’t know how to help.
    * Your friend says a joke that is so funny you can barely stop laughing.
    * You thought you were going to be able to go to your favorite restaurant for your birthday, but your parents said you can’t go now.

2 - Discussion

- Talk about how we all have situations that make us feel big feelings. Sometimes those feelings are big and happy feelings, but sometimes they are scared, sad, or angry feelings.
- When we feel big feelings because of things that we don’t like, we need ways to help ourselves calm down.
- Tapping is one way you can help yourself calm down and help your brain remind you of something good.

3 - Explain the concept:

- First, have the child name the feeling that is big and find an “even though” statement to go with that feeling.
- Even though I feel anger, I am okay.
- Even though I feel big scared, I am strong and reslient.
- Even though I feel sad, I am a good kid.
- Even though I feel upset with my friend, I am smart.
- Even though I feel lonely, I am a good person.
- Then, ask the student to rate the feeling 0-10.
- Have the student tap while repeating the even though statement they chose.
- After each round, have the student rate the feeling until they get it down to a 0, 1 or 2.

Closing:

- Do this with the student anytime they are having a big feeling in class or report on something difficult. Have them try it on their own and report back on how it worked for them.
- Extension: Depending on the situation or context of the student, you may want to actually do this within the moment of conflicts or challenges, teach a parent or family member to help support the child in high stress moments, or do a daily routine with this to help the student get continued mastery over it.

Handouts:

Tapping diagrams - https://www.tappingsolutionfoundation.org/tapping-diagrams/

Tapping resources for educators: https://www.tappingsolutionfoundation.org/educatorparent-corner/

Activity 2-6: "There's No Such Thing as a Dragon"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will increase their negative affect tolerance by practicing discussing difficult things in small batches or chunks.	Resilience, Perseverance, Courage	Supports sense of individual safety, and provides choice and empowerment for individual coping and resilience	Grades 2-6
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness, Self-Management American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SMS 1. Responsibility for self and actions ASCA B-SMS 2. Self-discipline and self-control ASCA B-SMS 7. Effective coping skills	Students will increase their negative affect tolerance by practicing discussing difficult things in small batches or chunks.	"There's No Such Thing as a Dragon" by Jack Kent There's No Such Thing as a Dragon worksheet - https://drive.google.com/file/d/1AX0tv7WEf1yvlhb1K7pzilqMIHFDx7jD/view?usp=sharing	Individual

Steps:

1 - Hook
- Read "There's No Such Thing as a Dragon" by Jack Kent
- Ask students what they noticed about the size of the dragon?
- What made the dragon change sizes?

2 - Explain the concept:
- Sometimes we have really big, sad, angry, or confused feelings. They might start out small and we might feel like we need to ignore them. But, when we ignore feelings, sometimes they can grow bigger, just like when the dragon was ignored.
- Ask the student "How can we pay attention to our feelings so we can help them stay little and helpful?" Together, come up with previously taught coping skills or other strategies for managing emotion regulation, such as:
    * Talk to a trusted adult
    * Write in a journal
    * Check in on feelings when they aren't so big
    * Use coping skills, such as breathing, music, or yoga
    * Practice "Name it to Tame it"
    * Use I-statements
    * Use a Feelings Phone to practice
    * Do something to distract until you can talk about the feeling
    * Move around while talking about feelings
    * Use art to express feelings
    * Find a book that matches your feelings
    * Find a stuffy or a doll to help you feel better
    * Use a puppet to talk about your feelings

Closing:

- Using the dragon worksheet, have students write down ways they can "pay attention" to their dragon and talk about big feelings instead of ignoring them, demonstrating resilience, perseverance, and courage.
- Extension: Create a feelings journal for students to write in daily about feelings they are having. Use this to help students select coping skills or strategies to help them keep their emotions smaller rather than overwhelming.

Handouts:

There's No Such Thing as a Dragon worksheet - https://drive.google.com/file/d/1AX0tv7WEf1yvlhb1K7pzilqMIHFDx7jD/view?usp=sharing

Activity 6-8: "Fair Fighting Rules"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will learn about what it means to have safe, healthy conflict. Students will create a list of fair fighting rules for themselves and role play safe conflict with peers.	Kindness, Respect	Structured demonstration, peer empathy, and safe peer community. The teacher provides an opportunity for student voice and choice throughout the lesson. The teacher protects/creates emotional safety around vulnerable disclosures.	Grades 6-8
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competencies: Self Awareness Self Management Social Awareness Relationship Skills	Teacher observation of student participation and discussion. Student Deliverable: Fair Fighting Rules	Paper, pencil, drawing materials	Group

Steps:

1. HOOK:

- Pose a question that prompts a difference of opinion within the class. If you like _____ stand on the left side of the room, if you don't like _____ stand on the right side of the room. If you are indifferent, you can stay seated. The teacher can choose based on knowledge of their students, here are few options to consider:
  * Favorite bands/musical artists
  * Hot/Cold Lunch
  * School Subjects
  * Fictional Books
  * Sports
- Once students have taken their place in the room, encourage them to talk candidly with their peers ON THEIR SAME side about why they like/dislike the chosen topic.

2. Whole Group Discussion:

- Have students return to their desks. Encourage them to reflect on the ease of conversation with the peers they AGREED with:
  * What was it like talking with your peers who agreed with your opinion?
  * What was the tone of the conversation? Was it respectful and kind?
  * How might this look different if you were talking to someone on the other side of the room?
- Take this an opportunity to discuss that ALL relationships in their life will have a difference of opinion at some point and that there are certain parameters that help someone have HEALTHY and SAFE conflict. Read today's objective as a class and encourage some discussion around conflict they have been involved in or witnessed:
  * What would it look like for conflict to be safe and healthy?
  * What might it look like if conflict didn't feel safe or healthy?
  * Do you feel healthy conflict is something adults have to work on too?

NOTE: Before asking this question, set students up for vulnerable disclosures. "For the next question, you can either share something personal or choose to skip/just take a listening role. If someone is sharing something personal, be an empathetic/compassionate listener": Have you ever been witness to someone who was having an unhealthy or unsafe conflict? What was that like for you?

- Open up conversation surrounding positive character traits to ensure students know that there are ways to make sure conflicts are respectful, kind, and healthy, while self-advocating. One way is to create fair fighting rules! Let students know that today they will be creating their own list, but that you will get them started with a few examples. Instruct them to title a piece of paper "Fair Fighting Rules" and number it 1-10.

- Give them an example: One fair fighting rule is to ALWAYS respect body boundaries, so let's make a rule about that together:
I will always respect body boundaries, never hitting or becoming physical in any way.

3. PAIR STUDENTS: Instruct students to pair up and work on the remaining rules with a partner. Encourage them to think about both physical and emotional boundaries that might keep the conflict safe.

Closing:

1. Once the pairs have completed their Fair Fighting Rules, have students go back to the statement of opposition from the beginning of class: If you like _____ stand on the left side of the room, if you don't like _____ stand on the right side of the room. Those who are indifferent will need to choose a side for practice/role playing.

2. Encourage students to engage in a respectful, healthy, and safe debate about their position with a student from the opposing side. Set a timer for 10 min.

3. Once the timer is up, facilitate some whole group discussion to debrief:
   - What was it like talking with your peers who agreed with your opinion?
   - What was the tone of the conversation?
   - How were your fair fighting rules supportive?

4. Let students know that you chose a low stakes/low risk topic today, but that these fair fighting rules should apply in higher stakes conversations as well. Remind students that if they are ever part of an argument that does not respect their fair fighting rules, that they can always advocate for themselves by telling a safe adult. This also applies if they are witness to adults not following the fair fighting rules.

Activity 9-12: "What is My Conflict Style?"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	**Character Traits Targeted:**	**Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:**	**Age Range:**
Students will explore the benefits of healthy conflict and the costs of unsafe/unhealthy conflict. Students will take an informal self-reported assessment to better understand their own conflict styles.	Resilience, Kindness, Respect, Empathy	Teacher to provide voice and choice throughout activity. Relational safety with structured group sharing, rituals of belonging, and peer empathy.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competencies: Self Awareness Self Management Relationship Skills Responsible Decision Making	Teacher observation of student discussion and participation. Student Deliverable: 3 local supports/ resources available to victims of DV.	What's My Conflict Style Worksheet Internet/access to student devices for extension activity Teacher access to fact sheet about IPV (Preventing IPV)	Group

Steps:

1. HOOK:
   - Have students close their eyes and imagine a world with NO conflict. Encourage them to think of how this might impact them personally, on a societal level, how this would feel, and how it might look long term.
   - Provide silent reflection for 2-3 min.

2. OPEN DISCUSSION:
   - Facilitate a discussion about their reflections:
     * What did you imagine?
     * Was this easy or hard for you to imagine and why?
     * Does this seem reasonable?
     * What would be better and what would be potentially worse if we all agreed on everything?
     * It is clear that conflict has and will inevitably be an inherent part of the human experience. What do you feel makes conflict healthy vs unhealthy?
   - Focus on the character traits resilience, kindness, respect, empathy, etc. as appropriate.
   - When navigating our own conflicts and relationships, it is important we are self-aware and respect everyone's physical and emotional safety. Let's explore our own conflict styles - this will help us self-reflect on how we currently show up in conflict.

3. INDIVIDUAL WORK:
   Handout the What's Your Conflict Style informal assessment. Have students self-report and the scoring key to identify their type (Shark, Turtle, Teddy Bear, Fox, or Owl).

4. OPEN DISCUSSION:
   Encourage some discussion around their results (provide choice in sharing or taking a listening role to protect vulnerable disclosures):
   - Did your result surprise you?
   - Do you feel your result feels accurate to you? What fits and what doesn't?
   - What did you learn about the possible advantages and disadvantages of your style?
   - How does knowing your conflict style allow you to grow in resilience, empathy, respect, and/or kindness?

Closing:

For closing, remind students that the informal assessment does not determine their conflict style forever and that they can change/adjust the way they navigate conflict over time with mindful practice of new responses.
Let students know that when conflict becomes unhealthy or unsafe, it can result in domestic violence. If time permits, teachers can share some facts/statistics raising awareness about the issue. Provide warning of emotional content before reading.

A possible extension to this lesson, would include encouraging students to find 3 local resources/supports that aid those who are suffering from DV.

Handouts:

What's Your Conflict Management Style? (One for every student)

Activity 9-12: "The Drama Triangle"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will be able to describe roles in the drama triangle that can break down relationships and identify at least one antidote strategy for each point on the triangle to promote healthy relationships.	Resilience, Reflection, Fairness, Compassion	Building transparency in relationships, collaboration and mutuality, empowerment.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL Competency: Relationships Skills, Social Awareness American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SS 2. Positive, respectful and supportive relationships with students who are similar to and different from them ASCA B-SS 6. Effective collaboration and cooperation skills ASCA B-SS 8. Advocacy skills for self and others and ability to assert self, when necessary ASCA B-SS 9. Social maturity and behaviors appropriate to the situation and environment	Students will be able to describe roles in the drama triangle that can break down relationships and identify at least one antidote strategy for each point on the triangle to promote healthy relationships.	Blank sheets of paper for students Writing utensils [Optional] Drama Triangle Workbook (MISIC, 2025) - https://misiciowa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Drama-Triangle-Workbook-With-Worksheets.pdf	Small Groups

Steps:

1 - Hook

- Ask students to brainstorm qualities of a healthy relationship vs qualities of an unhealthy relationship. Students can add to a collaborative white board or can write and then discuss in pairs, groups or as a whole class.
- The teacher may want to start them out with a few examples, such as:
  * Healthy - kindness, honesty, compassion, fairness
  * Unhealthy - lying, controlling, name calling

2 - Discussion

- Tell students that healthy relationships are actually hard work and it's important to learn skills to help with all kinds of relationships: friendships, romantic relationships, family relationships, etc.
- Have students think in their mind about one relationship they have that they feel is healthy and one that could use some work. Tell students this is private and they don't need to tell anyone, but to keep them in mind as they learn.

3 - Explain the concept:

- When we engage in relationships, it can be difficult to stay in healthy roles. Sometimes relationships push us into roles that are unhealthy and dysfunctional and it's our job to learn to recognize and adjust our responses to promote healthy relationships.
- Have students fold a paper in half. On one half of the paper, have students draw a triangle with the point down, like this:
- Introduce the drama triangle and the three roles associated with the drama triangle while having students write each role on the various points, including any characteristics associated with each role:
- Review the roles together:
  * Persecutor (top left) - This person blames others and has a hard time taking responsibility for their own problems. This person likes to feel in control, but sometimes at the expense of their relationships.
  * Rescuer (top right) - this person seeks to help, give advice or support others, but often neglects their own needs in the process.
  * Victim (bottom point) - this person believes they are powerless or helpless and that circumstances are happening to them and they have no control. They often seek a Rescuer to help them.

- Pair & Share - have students reflect and share with a peer partner where they have noticed these in their social worlds. Possibly share out examples to solidify understanding.
On the other half of the paper, have students draw a second triangle with the point down and an arrow going from one to the other, like this:

- Explain to students that in order to adjust these roles to be adaptive or helpful, we need to adjust the roles slightly. Have students label the more adaptive roles on the second triangle:
  * Persecutor can become a Challenger. Instead of blaming others, this person can hold others accountable and focus on growth in an assertive way rather than an aggressive way.
  * Rescuer can become a Coach. Instead of fixing people they see as broken, they can help support others in solving their own problems.
  * Victim can become a Creator. They can recognize that they have power to come up with solutions to help their circumstances and seek out learning and creativity to help them find solutions.

- Pair & Share - have students share with a peer partner where they have noticed these in their social worlds. Possibly share out examples to solidify understanding.

4 - Self Reflection:

- Ask students to think back to the relationships they considered in their own lives. Have them take a second to reflect on what they could do to help their healthy relationships become healthier and their less healthy relationships adjust to healthier roles.
- Depending on the group, you can invite them to share out, write in a personal journal or just quietly reflect.

Closing:

Have students turn their paper over and write on the back answers to these questions:

- What are the three roles in the drama triangle and how would you describe them?
- What are the three antidote roles to the drama triangle and how would you describe them?
- What role/antidote do you think you would like to work on in your own relationships and why?

Extension:

- Have students identify drama triangle roles in social studies by seeing them in current events.
- Have students experiment with antidotes in their personal lives and be prepared to share what they noticed.
- Work with the librarian to find literature on positive relationships and build a list and create free reading time to increase skills.

Handouts:

[Optional] Drama Triangle Workbook (MISIC, 2025) - https://misiciowa.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Drama-Triangle-Workbook-With-Worksheets.pdf

Activity 9-12: “Communication Patterns: Breakdowns & Antidotes”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will be able to describe the four behaviors that can break down relationships and identify at least one antidote strategy to promote healthy relationships.	Resilience, Fairness, Compassion, Honesty	Building transparency in relationships, collaboration and mutuality, empowerment	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
ollaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL Competency: Relationships Skills, Social Awareness American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SS 2. Positive, respectful and supportive relationships with students who are similar to and different from them ASCA B-SS 6. Effective collaboration and cooperation skills ASCA B-SS 8. Advocacy skills for self and others and ability to assert self, when necessary ASCA B-SS 9. Social maturity and behaviors appropriate to the situation and environment	Students will be able to describe the four behaviors that can break down relationships and identify at least one antidote strategy to promote healthy relationships.	Communication Breakdowns and Antidotes - https://drive.google.com/file/d/1mMQH0LkMxsj8ZSjtLAxUJIRL7B2zZ5gL/view?usp=sharing	Small Groups

Steps:

1 - Hook

- Ask students to brainstorm qualities of a healthy relationship vs qualities of an unhealthy relationship. Students can add to a collaborative white board or can write and then discuss in pairs, groups or as a whole class. The teacher may want to start them out with a few examples, such as:
  * Healthy - kindness, honesty, compassion, fairness
  * Unhealthy - lying, controlling, name calling

2 - Discussion

- Tell students that healthy relationships are actually hard work and it’s important to learn skills to help with all kinds of relationships: friendships, romantic relationships, family relationships, etc.
- Have students think in their mind about one relationship they have that they feel is healthy and one that could use some work. Tell students this is private and they don’t need to tell anyone, but to keep them in mind as they learn.

3 - Explain the concept:

- One really important element of healthy relationships is effective communication. Did you know there are four communication patterns that research shows are likely to dissolve, disrupt or harm your relationships? The four communication breakdowns are:
  * Criticism
  * Contempt
  * Defensiveness
  * Stonewalling

- Split into groups and have each group research what each of them are and come up with an example of how they may look (in any relationship: romantic, family, friends, etc.). Use resource materials for support.
- Have the students come back together and have each small group report on their type of communication.
- Then, split into the same groups and give the students the “antidotes” to change these unhealthy patterns into healthier patterns. The four antidotes are:
  * I-statements
  * Expressing gratitude
  * Take responsibility
  * Self-soothe

- Have them take their example and adjust it to be healthier using their antidote.
- Have students come back together and have each small group report.

4 - Self Reflection:

- Ask students to think back to the relationships they considered in their own lives. Have them take a second to reflect on what they could do to help their healthy relationships become healthier and their less healthy relationships adjust to healthier communication patterns.
- Depending on the group, you can invite them to share out, write in a personal journal or just quietly reflect.

Closing:

Have students write an exit ticket with the four communication breakdowns and at least one antidote they will try to improve their own relationships.

Extension:

- Have students identify communication breakdowns in social studies by seeing them in current events.
- Have students experiment with antidotes in their personal lives and be prepared to share what they noticed.
- Work with the librarian to find literature on positive relationships and build a list and create free reading time to increase skills.

Handouts:

Communication Breakdowns and Antidotes - https://drive.google.com/file/d/1mMQH0LkMxsj8ZSjtLAxUJIRL7B2zZ5gL/view?usp=sharing

Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse, also called psychological abuse or emotional neglect, is deliberate behavior on the part of a caregiver that causes harm to a child's self-worth and emotional development (CDC, 2024; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019; National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, n.d.). This form of abuse can be complex and difficult to ascertain. It is common for emotional abuse to take place alongside other forms of abuse, but it can also be the only form of abuse that is occurring (Prevent Child Abuse America, n.d.). Examples of emotional abuse include punishing children for developmentally healthy behavior, interpersonal skills, or evidence of self-esteem, withholding love and affection, rejecting, ignoring, discouraging emotional attachment, exposing children to scary and/or sad things, isolating them, using ridicule, criticism, name calling, humiliation, and making them the focus of mean jokes, shaming, degrading, and blaming them for things that aren't their fault (CDC, 2024; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019; National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, n.d.). When prolonged, emotional abuse is considered a form of trauma because it overwhelms a child's ability to cope, disrupts their emotional and cognitive development, and negatively shapes their internal sense of identity and security. Children may internalize these experiences as self-blame, worthlessness, or chronic fear. Over time, this can lead to trauma-related symptoms such as hypervigilance, anxiety, depression, difficulty regulating emotions, attachment disturbances, and post-traumatic stress responses (Spinazzola et al., 2014; Wright et al., 2016).

VS Case Study - Emotional Abuse

A 5th grade girl carried deep scars from years of verbal abuse at home. She rarely spoke, and when she did, it was negative about herself. Through assemblies focused on Compassion and daily mentoring from her teacher, she learned her voice mattered. Staff modeled kindness in every interaction, teaching her to recognize her own worth. By the end of the year, she was standing on stage leading a character assembly — a complete transformation fueled by consistent, caring relationships.

Effects on children

Social Impact

Socially, children who have experienced emotional abuse struggle with developing and maintaining emotional bonds with others (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). This inability to bond and access social networks puts individuals at risk for social avoidance and isolation. A recent study of college students who had experienced childhood emotional abuse explored some indicators of social avoidance in this population. They found that emotional abuse can lead individuals to be hyper-sensitive to rejection, and unable to perceive social support, with individuals struggling to sense warmth and encouragement from others (Zheng et al., 2025). These individuals tend to isolate socially, possibly due to childhood experiences of rejection from a primary caregiver (Zheng et al., 2025). Emotional abuse disrupts trust, attachment, and emotional regulation, which are fundamental for peer relationships and learning. Further, social isolation, if unaddressed, can contribute to depression, anxiety, academic disengagement, and reduced well-being.

To support students who have experienced emotional abuse, schools can serve as protective environments that foster both healing and personal growth. Trauma-informed practices emphasize predictable routines, consistent and caring relationships, and compassionate responses to social withdrawal or avoidance, helping students rebuild trust and a sense of safety. Integrating character development, educators can explicitly teach social-emotional skills and virtues such as emotional regulation, empathy, and patience, while providing structured opportunities for peer connection through cooperative learning, mentoring, or community-building activities. Reflection exercises, guided journaling, and strengths-based feedback can help students recognize personal resilience and develop a positive sense of self. Additionally, schools can collaborate with families and external counseling services, ensuring a supportive network that encourages social engagement, nurtures emotional bonds, and promotes long-term well-being.

Emotional Impact

Emotional abuse has both short term and long term impacts on a child's self-worth, emotional well-being, and emotional development (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). Among children who have experienced emotional abuse, research has shown difficulties in understanding social and emotional information, which might explain why this population is more prone to difficulties in this area (Bick & Nelson, 2015). While healthy social/emotional information might be difficult to process, this population shows a hypervigilance, or heightened sensitivity, to angry vocal tones and threatening faces, which has been demonstrated across all domains of childhood from adolescence to infants as young as 6 months old (Bick & Nelson, 2015; Zheng et al, 2025). Emotional abuse effectively closes off social access for these individuals, causing them to lose the benefits of emotional bonds and social networks.

VS Case Study - Emotional Abuse

A seventh-grade boy faced ongoing emotional abuse from a family member, which left him questioning his identity and self-worth. At Victory Schools, staff leveraged the character pillar of integrity to help him rebuild confidence in his own values and choices. Teachers and counselors guided him in setting personal goals and standing firm in expressing his feelings, even when he feared criticism. He began using journaling and character reflections to strengthen his sense of truth and self-respect. Over the semester, he developed the courage to share his story with a trusted mentor and began advocating for his own needs. His academic performance improved as he gained pride in making decisions aligned with his values, showing remarkable growth in both character and confidence.

VS Case Study - Emotional Abuse

A first-grade girl at Victory Schools entered the year withdrawn and hesitant to participate in class after experiencing consistent emotional abuse at home. She often doubted her abilities and feared making mistakes. Victory teachers introduced the character pillar of compassion, encouraging her to see her own worth and to accept kindness from others. Through small group activities and daily affirmations, she learned to both give and receive compassion, slowly opening up to classmates and staff. With patient guidance and supportive counseling, her confidence grew, and she began sharing her ideas proudly during class discussions. Today, she smiles more, engages with peers, and demonstrates a deep understanding of empathy and care for others.

For schools, creating safe, predictable environments and maintaining consistent routines helps students feel secure and reduces anxiety, while staff modeling respectful, caring interactions fosters trust. Social-emotional learning programs and character education can teach students to recognize, label, and regulate emotions, and cultivate virtues such as empathy, patience, resilience, and gentleness. Structured opportunities for cooperative learning, mentoring, or service projects provide positive social experiences, helping students rebuild confidence in relationships. Strengths-based reflection and guided journaling support self-awareness and resilience, while collaboration with families and mental health professionals ensures a supportive network. Together, these strategies help students regain social access, strengthen emotional bonds, and develop a positive sense of self.

Cognitive Impact

Children who experience emotional abuse have been shown to experience a higher degree of negative outcomes compared to other types of abuse (Strathearn et al., 2020). There is a component of emotional abuse, particularly in the first four years of life, that has been shown to lead to a smaller head circumference, and a loss of cognitive ability and decline in function over time in both human and rodent models studied (Strathearn et al., 2020). In particular, vocabulary acquisition suffers, as do high school completion and employment rates (Strathearn et al., 2020).

Schools can play a critical role in mitigating the cognitive impacts of early emotional abuse by providing supportive, structured, and enriching learning environments. Trauma-informed strategies include offering consistent routines, clear expectations, and individualized academic support to help students who may struggle with attention, memory, or language acquisition. Explicit teaching of vocabulary and language skills through multi-sensory approaches, scaffolding, and repeated practice can help address gaps in learning while fostering a sense of competence and mastery. Integrating character development, educators can nurture perseverance, curiosity, and self-discipline through project-based learning, reflective exercises, and goal-setting activities that reinforce students' belief in their own abilities. Collaborative learning, mentoring programs, and opportunities for student leadership not only strengthen cognitive skills but also promote social connectedness and moral growth, helping students build resilience, confidence, and a sense of agency despite early adverse experiences.

Physical Impact

Regarding childhood emotional abuse, there are more specific physical effects that research has identified to be connected with this form of abuse. Children can experience delayed physical development, which is known as 'failure to thrive', self-injurious behaviors, a heightened pain response and awareness, and digestive issues such as stomach pain, constipation, and irritable bowel syndrome (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019; National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, n.d.). These symptoms are not merely psychological but are deeply rooted in the body's stress response systems. Chronic exposure to emotional trauma can lead to dysregulation of the autonomic nervous system, resulting in a hyperarousal state that affects various bodily functions. For instance, research indicates that children with complex trauma histories may develop chronic or recurrent physical complaints, such as headaches or stomachaches (NCTSN, 2017). Additionally, studies have shown that emotional abuse can lead to increased anxiety and challenges in social interactions (Mayo Clinic, 2023).

To support students experiencing these physical effects, schools can implement trauma-informed practices that address both the emotional and physical needs of these children. Establishing a predictable and safe environment is crucial; this includes consistent routines, clear expectations, and a calm classroom atmosphere. Incorporating mindfulness and self-regulation techniques can help students manage stress and bodily sensations associated with trauma. Providing opportunities for physical activity and relaxation exercises can also aid in regulating the nervous system. Furthermore, offering access to school-based health services, including counseling and support for physical complaints, ensures a holistic approach to student well-being. By integrating these strategies, schools can create an environment that supports the healing and development of students affected by emotional abuse.

Where to Get Additional Support

Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline
A 24/7 confidential service providing support, resources, and information on reporting child abuse. Call or text: 800-422-4453

Prevent Child Abuse America
Focuses on preventing child abuse and neglect through education and advocacy. Visit: preventchildabuse.org

National Domestic Violence Hotline
Offers confidential support for individuals affected by domestic violence. Call: 1-800-799-SAFE (7233)

Sesame Workshop – Emotional Well-Being Initiative
Provides resources to help young children understand and express their feelings. Visit: Sesame Workshop Emotional Well-Being www.childwelfare.gov

Activity K-2: "Tracing Shapes"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
To use a calming, repetitive motor activity (tracing) to support emotional regulation. To give children a safe way to symbolically "redraw" and "rewrite" affirmations about themselves. To affirm dignity, worth, and safety by pairing tracing with positive statements. To provide children with a predictable, safe structure they can return to when emotions feel overwhelming.	Courage, Hope, Resilience, Trustworthiness	This activity reinforces safety, empowerment, and voice. Emotional abuse can make children internalize harmful messages about who they are. Tracing provides a steady, calming practice while pairing the action with affirmations that restore dignity and worth. By allowing choice of shapes and colors, children experience agency.	Grades K–2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 2: Self-Management	Observed ability to identify emotions and sources of connection. Verbal or creative expression of emotion through art or discussion.	Crayons, markers, or colored pencils Pre-drawn shapes (hearts, circles, stars, squares) Optional Ziploc per child Quiet, comfortable reading space	One-on-one or small group (2–4 children) with adult facilitator

Steps:

- Facilitator's Note: Please be aware—this session may stir deep emotions for children, especially those navigating or recovering from emotional abuse. Before delivering this activity, please ensure you have gained approval or consultation from your school's counseling department and/or leadership team. Engaging in trauma-informed dialogue with children is meaningful work, and it must be done with safeguards in place, clear follow-up plans, and alignment with your school's broader wellness supports. After the session, consider checking in with your mental health team or school social worker to share any observations or to debrief supportively.

1. Welcome and Opening (3–5 minutes)
    - Create a calm space for the activity with cozy seating or soft lighting.
    - Invite each child to choose crayons, markers, or colored pencils and a few pre-drawn shapes.
    - Narrate and model: Let's take three slow breaths. Each time we breathe out, we trace a shape.

2. Tracing shapes (4-5 minutes)
    - Narrate and model: choose a shape and trace it slowly, over and over.
    - As they trace, pair with affirmations (spoken by adult or child, depending on comfort):
        * Heart "I am loved."
        * Star "I shine bright."
        * Circle "I am safe."
        * Square "I am strong."
        * Triangle " I am brave."
        * Parallelogram "I am special."

3. Adding Color and Expression (5-8 minutes)
    - Narrate and model: Now choose your favorite shape and color it in. Think about how that word (safe, loved, strong, shine) feels inside you.
    - Optional discussion prompt: Which shape feels most like you today? How did you show courage, hope, etc.?

Closing:

Display in a prominent location or package for each child in a Ziploc to carry in their folder or bag.
Narrate: Each shape is a reminder: you are safe, you are strong, you are loved, and you shine.

Activity K-2: "Family Manners"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will be able to identify 3 "family manners" or behaviors that families use to treat each other with kindness. Students will be able to identify one thing they can do if their family is still learning manners.	Respect, Caring	Builds social safety, promotes collaboration, instills coping strategies, and helps identify trusting connections	Grades K-2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL Competency: Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, Self-Management American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SMS 1. Responsibility for self and actions ASCA B-SS 6. Effective collaboration and cooperation skills ASCA B-SS 9. Social maturity and behaviors appropriate to the situation and environment	Students will be able to identify a "family manner" or behavior that families use to treat each other with kindness. Students will be able to identify one thing they can do if their family is still learning manners.	Family Manners Visual Sorting Cards - https://drive.google.com/file/d/1cSs1hc5oBPisSp3h4u2WIZZo5Th1FT_5/view?usp=drive_link Color Conflict Resolution Cards - https://drive.google.com/file/d/18t6ySXxxFapGyKqKUDFyr5ADBsW_rirG/view?usp=drive_link Sticky notes for each child	Individual Activity Small Group (4-6 students) Whole Group Lesson

Steps:

1 - Hook
- "How many of you know what manners are?"
- Students will respond with ideas that highlight behaviors that are polite and appropriate.

2 - Explain the concept:
- "Did you know that in our families, there are manners that we have to help us treat each other with kindness and respect? What do you think some of these might be?"
- Students may respond with behaviors such as smile, share, say nice words, etc.
- With the students (together or in small groups), sort the visual cards to identify which are family manners and which are not.
  * Family Manners
  * Listen to each other
  * Be kind
  * Care for each other
  * Share
  * Hug
  * Give presents
  * Help each other
  * Finish chores
  * Spend time together
  * Not Family Manners
  * Hit
  * Shout
  * Pull hair
  * Stop you from doing things that are really important to you
  * Swear
  * Call each other names
  * Ignore each other

- Discussion prompts to help:
  * How does this make you feel?
  * Why is this something that does/does not show kindness?
  * When has this happened to you? What's something else you could do?

3 - Building Family Manners/Conflict Resolution Skills:
- "Family manners are hard to do. We have to practice them. When you feel like doing something besides a family manner, what can you do?"
- Color Conflict Resolution Cards - Have the color conflict resolution cards hidden around the classroom for students to find.
- Individual - have the student find the cards hidden around the classroom
- Groups - have small groups pick 1-2 colors and go find their corresponding color cards
  * Have the students reconvene and each share their cards. Discuss what each card means and how it might help them to have their best family manners.
  * Get calm first - calm your bodies before you respond so you don't explode
  * Find win-win - find a solution that helps everybody feel happy
  * I-messages - use an I-message to help express your feelings (I feel ____ because____ I need _____)
  * Listen - listen to what the other person is saying
  * Empathy - try to imagine what the other person feels like
  * Ask for help - ask an adult or another person for help to solve the problem
  * Flip a coin - flip a coin to decide when there's conflict
  * Ignore what's annoying you - choose to ignore the think that's annoying you
  * Do something else - find something else to do
  * Say no - say "no"
  * Play rock-paper-scissors - play rock-paper-scissors to decide when there's conflict
  * Apologize if you did something hurtful - if you know you did something hurtful, apologize to the person you hurt
  * Breathe deeply - take a deep breath to calm your body
  * Walk away - walk away and find somewhere else to be
  * Take a break - go take a break
  * Find something to laugh about - find something that feel opposite than the anger or frustration you feel

4 - Activity Options
- Conflict resolution cards can be taught in separate lessons prior to teaching the family manners lesson so children are reviewing
- Each conflict resolution strategy can be taught and reviewed in depth over time through morning meetings, reviews before recess or class discussions
- Students can role play scenarios in which they would use these different strategies

Closing:

- Have students pick one family manner they will work on as well as one way they will work on this. Have them write it on a sticky note and stick it to their cubby. Tell them for group time the next morning, they will bring their stickies and talk about what they did at home.
- Extension: Continue discussing at morning meetings or check in times what each student is working on at home and how it's going.

Handouts:

Family Manners Visual Sorting Cards - https://drive.google.com/file/d/1cSs1hc5oBPisSp3h4u2WIZZo5Th1FT_5/view?usp=drive_link

Color Conflict Resolution Cards - https://drive.google.com/file/d/18t6ySXxxFapGyKqKUDFyr5ADBsW_rirG/view?usp=drive_link

Sticky notes for each child

Activity K-4: “Compliment Circle”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will be able to identify the difference between mean words and kind words.	Resilience, Compassion, Empathy	Emotional safety, Trustworthiness, Empowerment	Grades K–5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SMS 1. Responsibility for self and actions ASCA B-SS 2. Positive, respectful and supportive relationships with students who are similar to and different from them ASCA B-SS 4. Empathy	Students will be able to identify the difference between mean words and kind words and say at least one kind compliment to each student in the group.	“A Little Spot Learns Kind Words” by Diane Alber Kind Compliment starters poster - https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vJnoDk4vnDNMQZXeOtm0VUBbYagCwTqn/view?usp=sharing	Small Groups (4-6 students) Whole Group

Steps:

1 - Hook

Read the book “A Little Spot Learns Kind Words” by Diane Alber

2 - Explain the concept:

- Discuss from the book what they noticed about mean words vs kind words. Write the student’s thoughts on the board to reference throughout the lesson.
- Teach that a kind compliment uses kind words to tell someone something kind about themselves and show the poster with the kind compliment starters

3 - Giving a compliment:

- The teacher will model what to do to give a kind compliment with a puppet. The teacher will use the kind compliment starters to give the puppet a kind compliment.
- The students will then practice with the teacher giving the puppet kind compliments.

4 - Compliment circle:

- Have students sit in a circle with their legs out in front of them.
- The teacher will start by modeling a compliment for one of the students using the complement formula.
- Once the child has received a compliment, they will say “thank you for the compliment” and tuck their legs in to sit criss-cross applesauce.
- That student will then pick another student and give a compliment, showing compassion, empathy, etc. .
- This will continue until all students have received a compliment.

Closing:

Have students get into small groups and answer each question together:

- What is a mean word?
- What is a kind word?
- What is a compliment?
- Why do we want to give compliments to others?

Extension:

Create a kind compliment paper chain in the classroom. Whenever a student wants to give a compliment to another student, teacher, or person in the classroom, they can go to the compliment box, get a colored strip of paper and write the compliment on it. They then add it to the compliment chain that is a visual reminder in the classroom of kind words. The teacher can then give the students their compliments at the end of the week, at one on one student conferences or at another appropriate time.

Handouts:

Kind Compliment starters poster - https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vJnoDk4vnDNMQZXeOtm0VUBbYagCwTqn/view?usp=sharing

Activity 3-5: “Tracing Strength, Choosing Words”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	**Character Traits Targeted:**	**Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:**	**Age Range:**
To provide a calming, repetitive tracing activity that regulates emotions and focuses attention. To help children generate and “write in” affirmations that affirm dignity, worth, and resilience. To strengthen agency by allowing children to choose both the shape and the words they want to hold onto. To promote reflection on strengths, hopes, and identity beyond harmful messages they may have received.	Courage, Hope, Resilience, Trustworthiness	This activity reinforces voice, empowerment, and identity safety. Children impacted by emotional abuse often carry negative internalized messages. By tracing shapes and writing affirmations in their own words, they practice replacing stigma with dignity-centered self-talk. Giving them choice over shape, color, and words restores agency.	Grades K–2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 2: Self-Management CASEL Core 5: Responsible Decision-Making	Observed ability to identify emotions and sources of connection. Verbal or creative expression of emotion through art or discussion.	Crayons, markers, or colored pencils Blank Paper Optional folder per child Quiet, comfortable reading space	One-on-one or small group (2–4 children) with adult facilitator

Steps:

- Facilitator’s Note: Please be aware—this session may stir deep emotions for children, especially those navigating or recovering from emotional abuse. Before delivering this activity, please ensure you have gained approval or consultation from your school’s counseling department and/or leadership team. Engaging in trauma-informed dialogue with children is meaningful work, and it must be done with safeguards in place, clear follow-up plans, and alignment with your school’s broader wellness supports. After the session, consider checking in with your mental health team or school social worker to share any observations or to debrief supportively.

1. Welcome and Opening (2–3 minutes)
    - Create a calm space for the activity with cozy seating or soft lighting.
    - Invite each child to choose crayons, markers, or colored pencils and a few sheets of blank paper
    - Narrate and model: Let’s take three deep breaths. With each breath, trace a simple shape on your page to get started.

2. Tracing shapes (5-6 minutes)
    - Narrate and model: drawing and tracing shapes (circles, hearts, stars, or their own design).
    - Narrate and model: Inside each shape, write a word or short phrase that reminds you of your strengths, hopes, or who you are. i.e.,
        I am kind
        I am courageous
        I am resilient
        I am trustworthy
        I am creative
        I keep trying
        I matter

3. Sharing and Reflection (5-8 minutes)
    - Narrate and model: (but do not require) children to share one shape and affirmation.
    - Discussion prompt: How does it feel to see your words inside the shapes you traced?

Closing:

1. Display in a prominent location or package for each child in a folder to keep in their desk, locker, bag or home.

2. Review a few affirmations together: i.e., I am strong. I am creative. I am kind. I matter.

3. Narrate: No matter what anyone has said to you, these words are true. They are yours. You carry them with you.

Activity 6-8: "Brain Power!"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will explore the impact of others' words/actions on their self-perception. They will learn about neuroplasticity. Students will engage in an empowering activity that practices reframing negative thoughts.	Resilience, Kindness, Compassion	Structured, predictable group sharing and peer empathy. Anonymity to provide emotional safety for personal disclosures.	Grades 6-8
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competencies: Self Awareness Self Management	Teacher observation of student discussion. Student Deliverable: Left Hand/Right Hand written activity, though not collected by the teacher for anonymity	Paper Pencil Scissors	Group

Steps:

1. HOOK (Whole Group):
    - Read today's objective and encourage open discussion around the following question: What is the most interesting fact you know about our brains?
    - Once you have collected a few answers from the group, let them know the most interesting and empowering fact you know:

Teacher script: Our brains are neuroplastic (write on board). The neuroplasticity of our brains enables us to reorganize and form new neural connections throughout our lives. The ability our brains have to change and adapt can help us heal! It can even help us reframe and rewire unhealthy thoughts.

2. Begin the Lesson:
    - Trauma-informed best practice: Before beginning the lesson, inform students that their assignment will remain anonymous and not be collected by the teacher. The purpose is to be self-reflective.
    - Have the students fold a piece of paper in half.
    - Instruct students to label the left side as "Negative Thought" and on the right side "Positive Reframe".
    - Guide students to think about negative things (put-downs) people have said to them/about them. This could be ANYONE - parents, friends, peers, or negative thoughts they have come to believe about themselves.
    - Have them write 3 thoughts down with their NON-DOMINANT hand under the title "Negative Thought" (i.e. "I am not smart"). If a personal disclosure feels appropriate, the teacher can give an example of a negative thought they have struggled with before.
    - Gather responses from students about the difficulty of writing with their non-dominant hand and have them observe the legibility of their negative thoughts. Reiterate that they do not need to disclose the negative thought itself, rather reflect on the experience of writing with their non-dominant hand. Some anticipated responses: "That was hard! I can hardly read mine."
    - Ask students: How readable and strong would those negative thoughts become if someone practiced writing them every single day, multiple times a day?

Teacher script: You're right! With practice, those words would become a lot clearer and stronger. The more we FUEL a thought, the BIGGER, STRONGER, and CLEARER it becomes. If someone has put you down, remember the power of your own brain. It is neuroplastic. You can choose which words you fuel and make BIGGER, STRONGER, and CLEARER.

    - Have students use their DOMINANT hand to REFRAME those negative thoughts/self-perceptions ("i.e. I am smart").
    - Once they have reframed each thought, have them reflect on the ease of writing with their DOMINANT hand. Anticipated responses: "That was much easier, I can read it clearly!"

Teacher script: Yes, much easier! This is a lot like the power of our brains! We get to choose what thoughts are dominant in our minds by how often we reframe negative thoughts and how we choose to speak to ourselves.

Closing:

- If time permits, you can have the students cut their paper down the middle, separating their negative thoughts from their positive reframes. Set a waste basket in the center of the room. - Encourage students to crumple their negative thoughts and toss into the waste basket - make it fun!

- OPTIONAL: Pick up a few that missed the waste bin and read them aloud (REMAINING ANONYMOUS), encourage the class to create a positive reframe and toss it in the bin.
- Finally, have students RETRACE each of their positive reframes 10 TIMES (resembling the act of repeatedly reframing negative thoughts to make our positive thoughts BIGGER, STRONGER, and CLEARER. Encourage students to take their positive reframes with them, to put them somewhere they can read them often (i.e. tape to a bedroom mirror, in their locker, etc.).

Professional Development: "The Potential of Supportive Adults with regard to Self-Perception"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
To help adults reflect on the long-term impact of words—both harmful and healing—on a developing child's sense of worth. To build internal awareness of what emotional abuse may sound and feel like for a child. To identify small, repeatable ways that trusted adults can play a role in relational care and repair.	Empathy, Compassion, Trustworthiness, Respect	This activity invites adults to name, notice, and intentionally respond to emotional harm without requiring a child to retell or relive their experience. It honors the child's story as theirs and centers the adult's role in reinforcing safety, worth, and stability.	Adults
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 3: Social Awareness CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills	N/A	Pen and paper, journal, or digital device for private reflection A quiet space or calming background music (optional) Reflection prompts (printed or displayed) Optional: breathing or grounding script to open and close the session	Solo Reflection

Steps:

1. Start
    - Pause and ground yourself before reflecting.
    - Take a deep breath. Let your body know it is safe here.
    - Remind yourself: This reflection is about being the kind of adult a child can trust. A child experiencing emotional abuse may never say the words out loud. Your tone, your presence, and your consistency can remind them: you are not what was said about you, you are loved, and you matter

2. Reflection
    - Use the prompts below to guide your reflection. Remember to strive for slow pacing and emotional honesty. If helpful, jot down thoughts or draw.

    Prompt 1:

    Think back to something someone said to you—years ago—that made you feel small, ashamed, or invisible.
    What was said? Who said it? What stayed with you?

    Then shift:

    Now think about something someone said that made you feel seen, capable, or safe.
    What was said? Who said it? What stayed with you?

    Prompt 2:

    Consider how words used repeatedly to diminish a child—put-downs, sarcasm, comparisons, silence, or emotional withdrawal—can shape how they see themselves.
    When a child hears that they're annoying, selfish, dramatic, or a burden... they can begin to believe that's who they are. What we say and repeat can offer something different.

    Jot:

    What messages do I want to undo or reframe for a child through my daily presence?
    What words or gestures can I repeat that affirm a child's dignity, even if they don't believe it yet?
    How can I show empathy, compassion, respect, trustworthiness, etc. more deeply?

    Prompt 3:

    Write or reflect on these questions:
        - What is one sentence I want a child in emotional pain to believe about themselves—eventually?
        - What is one action I can take regularly that helps reinforce that truth?
        - How will I remind myself that my job is to walk beside the child, not carry or change them?

Closing:

Close by gently reminding yourself of purpose:
You don't have to fix a child's pain. You have to be someone who won't repeat it. Let your presence say: You are not what happened to you. You are not what someone said about you. You are worthy of kindness, and I will speak to that truth.

Consider revisiting this activity or your reflection periodically, or before key moments in support of children/students, like parent conferences, mutual problem-solving engagements, discipline conversations, or trauma-sensitive planning.

Incarcerated Parents

Parental incarceration is a serious issue that affects millions of children in the United States, yet it often remains invisible in schools and communities. According to the Annie E. Casey Foundation (2022), more than five million children, about 7 percent of all kids nationwide, have had a parent incarcerated at some point in their lives. These children are more likely to come from low-income families and communities of color, where economic hardship and systemic inequalities already create obstacles to their success. The experience of losing a parent to incarceration adds significant challenges that impact every part of a child's life, from their emotions to their academic achievement.

When a parent goes to prison, the effects ripple through the child's world in many difficult ways. Children often feel abandoned and confused, struggling to understand why their parent is gone. They may also experience shame or stigma because of the community's misunderstanding or judgment of their family situation (Ghandnoosh et.al., 2021). Beyond the emotional toll, children frequently face major changes like moving to a new home, shifting caregivers, or losing financial support when the incarcerated parent was a source of income. These sudden disruptions make it hard for children to find a steady, safe environment where they can thrive.

Research has shown that these ongoing challenges have real consequences. Children with incarcerated parents are more likely to develop mental health issues such as anxiety or depression, and they may struggle with behavioral problems in school (Geller, Garfinkel, Cooper, and Mincy, 2009). One important factor is childcare instability. When a parent is incarcerated, children often move between caregivers or experience disruptions in their daily routines, which makes it even harder for them to feel secure and succeed developmentally (Turney and Kaiser, 2024). These hardships increase the risk that these children will face academic setbacks and, without support, may be more likely to become involved with the juvenile justice system themselves, continuing the cycle of incarceration.

Schools are uniquely positioned to help break this cycle by creating supportive, stable environments that address the specific needs of children with incarcerated parents. Research and best practice emphasize the importance of trauma-informed approaches, which recognize that these children have experienced significant trauma and therefore require compassion, predictability, and understanding from adults (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). Alongside this, character education plays a crucial role by teaching students important values such as empathy, responsibility, respect, and perseverance, qualities that help children build resilience and a sense of identity despite difficult circumstances (Character.org, 2023).

VS Case Study - Incarcerated Parents

In third grade, a student was struggling to understand and accept that her father was incarcerated and would not be coming home soon, which is what she was expecting. We were intentional in the way that we provided consistent routines, encouragement, and a safe space where she was aware of what was happening and when it would be happening. Staff helped her build coping skills, reminded her of her strengths, and gave her the reassurance that she was not alone. With this care, she was able to stay focused in class and continue growing both academically and emotionally. Though she had ups and downs, she was aware that there would be a consistent group of caring adults that she can turn to at any time.

VS Case Study - Incarcerated Parents

A seventh-grade student carried the heavy burden of having a parent incarcerated, which left him feeling embarrassed and unmotivated in school. Victory teachers encouraged him to focus on the character pillar of responsibility to rebuild confidence and stability. He was given classroom responsibilities, such as assisting with technology setup and mentoring younger students during reading time. These roles helped him see his value within the school community. By following through on responsibilities, he built a sense of ownership and pride that transferred into his academics. Teachers noticed a significant shift in his engagement and accountability for his own learning. Over time, he came to understand that his circumstances did not define him; his responsible actions did. The student grew into a dependable role model for his peers, strengthening both his self-image and his academic performance.

When schools adopt these approaches, they offer much more than academic support. They provide a safe space where students feel valued and understood. This kind of environment encourages healing and growth, helping children process their experiences without fear of judgment or exclusion. It also fosters social and emotional skills that carry forward into adulthood, breaking the cycle of trauma and incarceration.

Educators and school leaders must understand the broad and lasting effects of parental incarceration to effectively support these students. By combining trauma-informed care with character education, schools can help children develop the emotional strength and ethical foundation they need to succeed. This requires intentional policies, training for staff, and collaboration with families and community organizations. With these supports in place, schools can become a critical source of stability and hope for children navigating the complex challenges of parental incarceration.

Causes of Trauma

The impact of parental incarceration extends beyond the initial separation, causing long-term emotional and developmental challenges for affected children.(Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022). The initial trauma often starts with an abrupt separation that typically lacks emotional preparation or clear explanation. Children may witness the arrest, frequently at home, an event described as confusing and terrifying by many, resulting in lasting trauma and a pervasive sense of insecurity (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). Without clear communication from caregivers or family members, children may develop uncertainty and mistrust which only intensifies their emotional distress.

Secondary impacts compound this trauma. Parental incarceration frequently causes children to experience changes in living arrangements as they move between relatives or foster care placements. These transitions disrupt a child's schooling and social connections, making it difficult for them to build stable relationships or feel safe in their environments (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022). Studies indicate that nearly half of children with incarcerated parents face two or more residential moves after the parent's incarceration. Each move increases instability (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2024). Economic hardship is common because families often lose critical financial support and caregivers sometimes cannot meet children's basic needs. This hardship adds stress and limits access to educational resources and extracurricular opportunities.

Stigma and shame related to parental incarceration profoundly affect children's well-being. Many experience judgment or exclusion from peers and adults who associate incarceration with moral failure rather than social inequity (Ghandnoosh et.al, 2021). This stigmatization can lead to social isolation and internalized shame which undermine a child's confidence and sense of belonging. These traumatic and destabilizing experiences are recognized as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), which research links to long-term developmental, behavioral, and physical health problems (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021). The cumulative nature of these ACEs means the trauma is less an isolated incident and more a chronic condition that undermines a child's ability to trust, regulate emotions, and succeed academically and socially.

Schools play a critical role by understanding these layers of trauma and responding with trauma-informed approaches. Training school staff to recognize trauma symptoms and communicate with empathy reduces misunderstandings and stigma. Creating safe spaces where students feel their experiences are validated, along with consistent and predictable routines, helps mitigate anxiety related to instability at home. Schools can partner with caregivers to offer family education sessions which help families talk about incarceration in developmentally appropriate ways. Research shows this improves children's emotional adjustment (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021).

VS Case Study - Incarcerated Parents

A second-grade girl at Victory Schools faced deep emotional pain after both of her parents were incarcerated, leaving her in the care of extended family. She often arrived at school quiet and withdrawn, carrying feelings of shame and confusion about her family situation. Victory teachers and counselors introduced the character pillar of integrity, helping her understand that her worth and identity were not defined by her parents' choices. Through guided discussions, journaling, and daily affirmations, she learned the importance of being honest about her feelings and staying true to her own positive values. Counselors worked closely with her caregiver to provide consistent emotional support and stability. Over time, she began to speak openly with trusted staff, participate more in class, and build strong friendships. Today, she shows remarkable growth in confidence and self-esteem, proving that integrity can empower a child to rise above difficult circumstances.

Effects on Children

Social Impact

Children of incarcerated parents frequently experience social withdrawal and difficulty trusting others, largely because they anticipate judgment or rejection. Research indicates these children often avoid social situations or become defensive, which hinders their ability to develop essential interpersonal skills (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2024). In many school environments, stigma leads to bullying and exclusion, further isolating these students. Nearly 30 percent of children with incarcerated parents report peer rejection or bullying directly related to their family situation, creating an additional barrier to healthy social development (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022). Some children cope with trauma by exhibiting aggressive or disruptive behavior, patterns often learned in unstable environments. These behaviors interfere with their ability to engage in cooperative learning and positive group interactions.

Character education that highlights empathy, respect, and collaboration can help counteract these social challenges by teaching students to rebuild trust and relate constructively with peers. For instance, schools can implement peer mentoring programs where older students support and model positive social behavior for younger peers affected by parental incarceration. Creating classroom norms that emphasize kindness and inclusivity also reduces stigma and bullying. Schools that weave these values into their culture and curriculum foster environments where children affected by parental incarceration feel safer and more accepted. Structured peer support or mentoring programs offer consistent role models and help reduce feelings of isolation, strengthening social connections (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2024).

Emotional Impact

The emotional burden on children with incarcerated parents is profound. These children commonly endure chronic feelings of sadness, anxiety, confusion, and low self-esteem. Their grief often extends beyond the physical absence of a parent to include the loss of family stability and hope for a future that involves parental reunification (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). Research shows approximately 40 percent of these children exhibit symptoms of depression or anxiety, reflecting the intense emotional strain they carry (Ghandnoosh et.al., 2021). This distress is intensified by fears surrounding their living arrangements and uncertainty about whether they will see their parent again. Many internalize guilt or self-blame, often reinforced by stigma in their families or communities. Schools that implement trauma-informed approaches prioritize emotional literacy, helping students identify, express, and manage their feelings in a supportive atmosphere.

Practical approaches include daily emotional check-ins where students briefly share how they are feeling with a trusted adult and creating small support groups where children learn coping strategies together. Integrating character education by focusing on resilience, hope, perseverance, and integrity through activities like storytelling or role-play can help students reframe their personal experiences and strengthen self-esteem. Schools combining trauma-informed counseling with character education have reported reductions in disciplinary incidents and improvements in emotional regulation (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2024).

Cognitive Impact

Chronic stress from parental incarceration has significant effects on brain development, especially in areas responsible for executive function, attention, working memory, and emotional regulation (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2020). These neurodevelopmental disruptions manifest as difficulties concentrating, retaining information, and completing academic tasks, often leading to misdiagnoses of behavioral disorders or oppositional behavior. Data shows about 25 percent of children with incarcerated parents score below their peers on standardized academic assessments, illustrating the learning setbacks linked to trauma and instability (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022).

Trauma-informed educational strategies that incorporate consistent routines, mindfulness practices, and sensory breaks can restore a sense of safety and focus for these students. For example, teachers can begin classes with brief mindfulness exercises or breathing techniques to help students center themselves before instruction. Providing structured, predictable schedules helps reduce anxiety and improves focus. Character education supports cognitive development by teaching goal-setting and self-regulation skills, encouraging students to set achievable academic goals and reflect on their progress, which builds agency and motivation. Schools that integrate these strategies often observe increased academic engagement and decreased absenteeism among students impacted by parental incarceration (Turney & Kaiser, 2024).

Physical Impact

The physical health of children experiencing parental incarceration is often compromised due to chronic stress and unstable living conditions. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) identifies common symptoms such as sleep disturbances, headaches, gastrointestinal issues, and weakened immune systems in children exposed to adverse experiences like parental incarceration. Inconsistent nutrition and irregular access to healthcare further exacerbate these health challenges (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). Research shows children with incarcerated parents are nearly twice as likely to report chronic health conditions compared to their peers, reflecting cumulative trauma effects (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022).

Educators, school nurses, and counselors often are the first to notice these physical symptoms, making their role critical in early intervention. Schools can respond by ensuring students have access to nutritious meals and designated quiet spaces to rest if feeling unwell. Coordinating with community health providers to support medical care continuity for students who frequently change residences or schools is essential. Training school staff to recognize physical symptoms as potential trauma indicators rather than distractions is vital in creating responsive environments that promote health and learning readiness (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021).

Personal Impact

Parental incarceration deeply affects a child's sense of identity and self-worth. Many children wrestle with feelings of shame, wondering if they share the "badness" society associates with their parent's incarceration or if their future is predetermined by family history. This internal struggle undermines self-esteem and leads to confusion about personal values and choices (Character.org, 2023). Research reveals that children in these situations often experience conflict between loyalty to their parent and societal judgment (Ghandnoosh et.al., 2021).

Character education offers a structured approach for positive identity development by engaging students in conversations about fairness, courage, justice, and responsibility. Schools can incorporate restorative justice programs and leadership opportunities that empower students to define themselves through values and actions, not family background. Celebrating student strengths publicly and encouraging service projects builds self-confidence and counters stigma (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2024).

Academic Impact

Children with incarcerated parents face disproportionate academic challenges. They are more likely to miss school, change schools frequently, and face disciplinary actions such as suspension or expulsion, which contribute to learning gaps (Turney & Kaiser, 2024). This instability disrupts continuity in learning and support networks, making academic success more difficult.

Schools can foster resilience by implementing trauma-informed policies such as flexible attendance rules and deadline extensions. Providing targeted tutoring and mentoring programs helps address learning gaps caused by frequent moves or absences. Character education focused on perseverance, self-regulation, and ethical decision-making nurtures motivation and a sense of belonging. Creating safe spaces within schools where students can express their emotions and reflect supports their dignity and helps them navigate complex personal challenges, promoting academic persistence (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2024).

Where to Get Additional Support

Supporting children of incarcerated parents is a collective effort that goes beyond just the classroom, and educators along with other school professionals play a vital role in this work. Thankfully, there are many accessible, research-based resources available to help schools and communities develop compassionate, trauma-informed strategies. A primary resource is the National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated at Rutgers University, which provides comprehensive training, research summaries, and practical tools tailored for educators and community workers serving this vulnerable group. Their materials assist schools in adopting best practices that address the academic and emotional challenges faced by these children, focusing on evidence-based methods to build resilience and stability (National Resource Center on Children and Families of the Incarcerated, n.d.).

Sesame Street in Communities offers free, trauma-informed resources designed specifically for children affected by parental incarceration. Their materials include videos, storybooks, and activity guides that support children in understanding and managing complex emotions in ways suitable for their developmental level. The program also provides advice for educators and caregivers on fostering nurturing environments that affirm children's experiences and help lessen feelings of isolation and shame. This focus on age-appropriate communication and emotional care is consistent with trauma-informed practices endorsed by child welfare professionals (Sesame Street in Communities, n.d.).

Furthermore, the Child Welfare Information Gateway, a branch of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, acts as a thorough resource center for evidence-based practice guidelines and policy recommendations. Their publications cover a broad range of topics, including effective interventions for families affected by incarceration, strategies to strengthen caregiver child relationships, and guidelines to foster safe, nurturing school climates. These resources are designed to inform practice at multiple levels from direct student support to system wide policy, ensuring that educators have the knowledge and tools to address both the immediate and long term impacts of parental incarceration (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021).

By leveraging these expert supported resources, schools can build robust support systems that not only address trauma but also nurture character development, empowering students to thrive despite adversity. These partnerships and tools help educators avoid working in isolation and instead create networks of care and understanding that foster positive outcomes for children and families impacted by incarceration.

Reflection and Next Steps

Addressing the effects of parental incarceration is not simply an act of kindness or charity; it is a fundamental issue of equity and justice. Schools must acknowledge that students carry their home experiences with them into the classroom, and unaddressed trauma can undermine every facet of their cognitive, social, and emotional development. To truly support these students, schools need to go beyond traditional academic interventions. They must also affirm students' identities, nurture their moral growth, and create environments that foster dignity and resilience.

School leaders have a critical role in examining whether existing policies and practices adequately meet the needs of students impacted by parental incarceration. Key considerations include whether educators receive training to recognize and respond to trauma in ways that avoid punitive measures. It is essential to assess if character education programs intentionally include and support students from diverse and disrupted family backgrounds. Reflecting on disciplinary approaches is equally important; rather than penalizing trauma-driven behaviors, schools should cultivate restorative practices that encourage healing, accountability, and personal growth.

Character education offers a powerful framework to address these challenges when it is thoughtfully integrated with themes of justice, compassion, and redemption. It encourages students not only to develop virtues like empathy and integrity but also to engage critically with systemic social issues that contribute to cycles of incarceration. By fostering discussions that challenge stigma and promote understanding, character education can empower students to redefine their narratives and values in the face of adversity.
Given the profound impact of parental incarceration on students, educators and school leaders should deeply consider how character education can be used as a tool for empowerment and inclusion. Some important questions for reflection include:

How can we identify and support students affected by incarceration in ways that protect their privacy and reduce stigma?
In what ways can our school climate be intentionally shaped to promote inclusivity and reduce shame associated with diverse family experiences?
How might we embed character education principles into daily classroom practices to uplift students coping with trauma and foster their resilience?
What partnerships with community organizations, mental health providers, or advocacy groups can be established to offer comprehensive and sustained support for these students and their families?

Are our character education efforts addressing justice and compassion explicitly enough to challenge systemic inequalities that contribute to family disruption?
How can we involve students in conversations about fairness and redemption to help them develop a strong, hopeful sense of identity despite adversity?
When schools take the time to reflect on important questions, they can go beyond just accommodating students affected by parental incarceration and truly recognize and affirm their worth and potential. These students often go unnoticed, carrying the heavy burden of loss, confusion, and trauma while trying to keep up with both school work and social life. By adopting a trauma informed approach grounded in character education, schools can become safe places where students find hope and room to grow not pity, but understanding, clear support, encouragement, and practical tools to face their challenges with dignity and strength. This kind of commitment to nurturing both the mind and character of every child, especially those impacted by incarceration, does not just help individual students, it helps build fairer, more just school communities that live up to their highest calling as places of transformation and equity.

Activity K-2: "Feelings Flower"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Help students recognize and express their emotions related to having an incarcerated parent.	Self-awareness, Empathy, Resilience	Validates emotions in a safe space using expressive art; offers emotional regulation support.	Grades K–2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SMS 1: Demonstrate ability to manage emotions Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Self-Awareness	Observation of emotional vocabulary and ability to identify safe adults.	Crayons, "Feelings Flower" template Create your own Emotion picture cards.	1-on-1

Steps:

1. Greet the student warmly and introduce the "Feelings Flower."
    - Look at the Flower
        * The center circle tells you the emotion you are exploring.
        * The petals around the center are blank for you to color.
    - Think About the Emotion in the Center
        * Focus on how this feeling looks, sounds, or feels in your body or in different situations.
    - Color the Petals
        * Choose colors that show that feeling to you. (see #2 of Procedure)
        * You can use different colors for each petal if the feeling has many parts.

2. Discuss how different colors can represent different feelings.
    * Red – Angry
        "I feel angry when someone takes my toy."
        "I feel mad when things don't go my way."
    * Orange – Nervous
        "I feel nervous when I try something new."
        "I feel nervous before a visit or a test."
    * Yellow – Happy
        "I feel happy when I play with my friends."
        "I feel happy when my parent writes or calls me."
    * Green – Surprised
        "I feel surprised when something unexpected happens."
        "I feel surprised when I get a special gift or visit."
    * Blue – Sad
        "I feel sad when I miss my parent."
        "I feel sad when I'm lonely."
    * Purple – Jealous
        "I feel jealous when friends get something I want."
        "I feel jealous when I see others spending time with their parent."

3. Invite the student to color petals based on emotions they feel when thinking about their parent.

4. Name emotions together and discuss who helps them when they feel that way.

Closing:

Praise the student's courage in sharing. Let them take the flower home or keep it in a safe space at school. Remind them it's okay to feel more than one thing at once. Give them a small "feelings journal" to draw in each week, tracking what petals they would color. Revisit in a future session to notice patterns or progress.

Handouts:

"Feelings Flower"

Activity K-2: "Who's in My Circle?"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
To help students identify a network of support and reduce isolation.	Trustworthiness	Fosters peer connection and normalizes diverse family experiences.	Grades K–2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SS 2: Create positive and supportive relationships Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Relationship Skills	Verbal sharing and drawing completion.	"Support Circle" template crayons or markers.	Small Group (3–6 students)

Steps:

1. Begin with a book read-aloud (e.g., My Daddy's in Jail)

   List of books to consider:
   - "My Daddy's in Jail" by Marianne Celano
   - "Visiting Day" by Jacqueline Woodson
   - "Mama Loves Me from Away" by Pat Brisson
   - "The Night Dad Went to Jail" by Melissa Higgins
   - "Kofi's Mom" by Richard W. Dyches
   - "Far Apart, Close in Heart: Being a Family When a Loved One is Incarcerated" by Becky Birtha
   - "Anna's Test" by Whitney Quinn Hollins, PhD
   - "Missing Daddy" by Mariame Kaba
   - "Dear Dad: Love, Nelson" by Margarett McBride
   - "A Visit to the Big House" by Oliver Butterworth
   - "The Princess Who Went Quiet" by Bianca Diaz
   - "But Why Is Daddy in Prison?" by Erika Ruiz
   - "An Inmate's Daughter" by Jan Walker

2. Discuss that families can look different.

3. Use the "Support Circle" worksheet for students to draw or name people who help them or that they trust.

4. Share circles (voluntary).

Closing:

1. Affirm the value of the people in their support circles and reinforce that they can always add new "helpers" like teachers or counselors.

2. Have students create a "Safe People Badge" for someone in their circle (e.g., draw and decorate a badge for a teacher, counselor, or sibling) and deliver it with help.

Handouts:

"Support Circle" Worksheet

Activity 3-5: “Bridge Builders”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Build peer empathy and strengthen identity beyond their parent’s incarceration.	Confidence, Empathy, Teamwork	Reduces stigma and builds group safety through shared narrative and strength-building.	Grades 3-5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SMS 10: Demonstrate ability to set goals Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Social Awareness	Participation in discussion and bridge completion.	Bridge template cut-out bricks with traits (kind, funny, strong) glue	Group (4–6 students)

Steps:

1. Icebreaker Question: “What is one thing we all like?”

2. Introduce the idea that “We build bridges to others with our strengths like empathy, teamwork, etc..”

3. Each child chooses bricks that describe themselves and adds to their ‘bridge’.

4. Have students share one positive quality about themselves with the group.

Closing:

1. Celebrate each student’s positive traits. Reinforce that they are each building bridges through their actions, not just their words.

2. Invite them to create a “Bridge Builder Challenge” where they write or draw one kind action to do at home or school during the week. Follow up in the next session.

Handouts:

“Bridge Builder” Worksheet

Activity 3-5: “Heart Talk”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Help students express complex feelings and understand they are not to blame.	Honesty, Courage, Compassion	Encourages emotional expression and counters shame through safe conversation.	Grades 3-5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA M 3: Demonstrate ability to manage transitions Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Self-Management	Student’s ability to complete heart sections with counselor guidance.	“Heart Talk” handout Markers Create heart pictures/stickers	1-on-1

Steps:

1. Introduce the idea of “Heart Talk” as a way to talk about what students are feeling inside.

2. Use the handout divided into “I feel…”, “I need…”, “I miss…”, “I hope…”.

3. Assist students in drawing, writing, or using stickers to express.

4. Use a “Feelings Thermometer” to talk about intensity.

Closing:

- Praise the student’s honesty, courage, compassion, etc. Help them pick one “heart phrase” to write on a sticky note and keep in their backpack or desk for comfort.
- Start a “Feelings Folder” for ongoing drawings, words, or quotes they can add to when emotions come up in future sessions or independently.

Handouts:

“Heart Talk” Handout
Feelings Thermometer

Activity 6-8: “My Story, My Strength”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Empower students to process their experience with reflection and personal growth.	Resilience, Courage	Encourages identity development and gives voice to personal experience.	Grades 6-8
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA M 1: Demonstrate coping skills Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Self-Awareness	Student’s reflection sheet and narrative choices.	“My Story” worksheet (timeline format) Optional journal	1-on-1

Steps:

1. Ask the student if they want to explore their personal journey, surrounding a specific event or trauma-inducing experience.

2. Help them build a timeline of “life moments” (can include drawings, symbols) on the ‘My Story Timeline’ worksheet.

3. Use guided questions like: “What helped you through this?” “Who do you trust now?”

- Exploring Supports & Resilience
    * Who helps you when you feel upset or stressed?
    * What’s something that makes you feel safe right now?
    * Are there people at school you feel comfortable talking to?

- Processing the Experience
    * How did you feel when you first found out your parent was incarcerated?
    * What has been the hardest part for you?
    * What has gotten easier over time?

- Identity & Trust
    * Who do you trust most right now, and why?
    * How do you know when someone is trustworthy?
    * How has this experience changed the way you see friends or adults in your life?

- Strengths & Coping
    * What helps you feel calm when you are worried?
    * What’s something you’ve learned about yourself through this experience?
    * What do you want others to understand about kids who have a parent in prison/jail?

- Looking Forward
    * What are your hopes for the future with your parent?
    * What kind of support do you wish adults could give you right now?
    * If someone else had a parent who was incarcerated, what advice would you share with them?

Closing:

- Reflect on how each life chapter or experience has shaped them. Point out one strength you observed during the session.
- Offer them a blank “chapter page” “My Story Timeline” sheet to add to when something meaningful happens. Encourage them to keep the timeline and continue writing their story.

Handouts:

“My Story Timeline”

Activity 6-8: “The Mask We Wear”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Promote safe exploration of identity and the gap between public and private feelings.	Empathy, Integrity	Fosters safety through metaphor and reduces isolation via shared truth.	Grades 6-8
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SS 5: Demonstrate ethical behavior Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Self-Awareness	Participation, ability to label masks and discuss feelings.	Blank mask templates markers	Group

Steps:

1. Discuss the idea that people sometimes wear “masks” and why.

2. Have students decorate the outside of the mask with what people see using words or drawings.

3. Inside of the mask: what the student feels or thinks.

4. Share insights with the group (optional).

Closing:

- Invite a moment of appreciation where students thank themselves for showing their “inside” feelings safely, like empathy, integrity, etc.

- Have students write a short affirmation or mantra on the back of their mask (e.g., “I am more than what people see.”). Optional: display anonymously on a “Wall of Strength.”

Handouts:

“My Mask”

Activity 9-12: “Chain Breakers”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Encourage students to explore generational cycles and their ability to choose a different future.	Hope	Empowers students by building on their strengths and helping them take ownership of their future.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-LS 7: Identify long- and short-term goals Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Responsible Decision-Making	Completed “Cycle Breaker” worksheet and goal articulation.	“Cycle Breaker Map” handout	Group

Steps:

1. Discuss the meaning of “breaking the cycle.”

2. Brainstorm examples of specific areas that often end up in systematic cycles: addiction, absence, silence.

3. Use the worksheet to name past and present realizations, as well as future goals.

4. Share future goals and “chain-breaking” commitments.

Closing:

- Have students speak a personal “chain-breaking” statement aloud (optional), such as “I will choose my own path.”

- Assign a creative reflection: a poem, song lyric, or short video presentation on what breaking the cycle means to them. Allow sharing in a future group session or safe online space.

Handouts:

“Cycle Breaker Map”

Activity 9-12: “Letters I Never Sent”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Help students process unresolved feelings or questions toward their incarcerated parent.	Honesty, Forgiveness	Gives private voice to complex emotions without pressure to share.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA A 1: Demonstrate ability to advocate for self Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Self-Management	Student’s willingness to write and reflect; optional discussion.	“Unsent Letter” template	1-on-1

Steps:

1. Introduce writing a letter that will not be sent—this activity will be used as a release of thoughts and emotions only..

2. Offer structure if needed: “I wish…”, “I feel…”, “I want you to know…”

3. Students may write silently or aloud with the help of an adult.

Closing:

- Offer affirming feedback on the emotional work they’ve done. Discuss whether they’d like to revisit or revise the letter later.
- Provide the option to write future letters—to their future self, another adult, or to process other situations—creating a “Private Journal of Unsent Letters.”

Handouts:

“Unsent Letter” Template

Immigration

Immigration can be deeply traumatic for children because it disrupts their sense of belonging, safety, and identity. For many, the journey begins with forced migration due to war, persecution, or extreme poverty, experiences that often involve exposure to violence, displacement, and loss. Others endure painful family separation during migration or deportation, creating attachment ruptures and feelings of abandonment. Once in a new country, children may face acculturation stress as they navigate conflicting cultural expectations at home and in school, often feeling torn between two worlds. Legal and socioeconomic instability, fear of deportation, poverty, and limited access to resources further compound these challenges. These stressors create a prolonged state of uncertainty and hypervigilance that can interfere with both emotional and cognitive development (Cowan et al., 2018).

VS Case Study - Immigration

A first-grade boy recently immigrated to the U.S. and entered Victory Schools carrying the stress of leaving family members behind and adjusting to a new language and culture. At first, he struggled to connect with classmates and often felt anxious about speaking in English, fearing he would be misunderstood. Victory teachers and counselors focused on the character pillar of respect, teaching him to value his own heritage while also respecting the differences of others. Through classroom activities celebrating cultural diversity and daily affirmations of his strengths, he began to share his story and proudly teach peers words from his native language. Over time, he gained confidence, built friendships, and embraced his new school community while honoring where he came from.

The long-term effects of immigration-related trauma often extend into a child’s sense of identity and relationships. Discrimination, language barriers, and cultural isolation can leave children feeling invisible or excluded, reducing their confidence and sense of belonging. At the same time, the stress carried by parents or caregivers can spill into the child’s emotional world. Oftentimes, these caregivers may also be coping with financial strain or their own unresolved trauma. While many children display resilience and adaptability, without supportive relationships and intentional interventions, ongoing stress may lead to chronic difficulties with trust, regulation, and learning. Immigration is not a single event but an ongoing process that shapes a child’s development in profound ways.

Effects on Children

Social Impact

Children who immigrate often face significant barriers to forming social connections with peers. Language differences can prevent them from fully participating in conversations or collaborative learning, while cultural differences may lead to misunderstandings, stereotyping, or peer rejection. Many immigrant children report feeling “different,” which can lead to exclusion, bullying, or withdrawal. To cope, some may cling to peers who share their cultural background, creating a sense of safety but limiting opportunities for broader integration into the school community (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2018).

VS Case Study - Immigration

A sixth-grade girl faced the trauma of sudden relocation after her family immigrated to the U.S., leaving behind friends and a familiar way of life. The pressure of learning a new language, helping her parents navigate community resources, and adapting to a different school system left her overwhelmed. Victory Schools’ character education program focused on the pillar of responsibility, helping her understand the power of owning her actions and setting small, achievable goals each day. Teachers supported her with leadership opportunities in class, while bilingual staff provided guidance to help her manage academic and personal challenges. By practicing responsibility—completing assignments, asking for help, and supporting her younger siblings—she began to thrive academically and socially. Today, she is a model of resilience, demonstrating how responsibility can transform fear into confidence and growth.

Schools play a critical role in counteracting these dynamics by intentionally building inclusive classroom communities. Trauma-informed strategies such as structured peer and cross-age buddy systems, community-building circles, and consistent routines create safety and predictability. Character education further reinforces respect, empathy, and inclusion by weaving them into daily classroom practices and expectations. When educators highlight diverse cultural traditions or provide collaborative opportunities that value every child’s contribution, immigrant students are more likely to feel seen, accepted, and connected to their peers.

Emotional Impact

Immigration can also disrupt a child’s emotional world, particularly when attachment bonds are broken. Separation from primary caregivers during migration or the ongoing stress parents experience after resettlement can undermine a child’s sense of safety and stability. Many internalize guilt, shame, or fear of abandonment, which often surfaces as anxiety, depression, or mistrust in relationships (Perreira & Ornelas, 2013). These emotional struggles can make it difficult for children to form bonds with teachers or classmates, creating a cycle of isolation and insecurity.

VS Case Study - Immigration

A pair of siblings, a brother (4th) and sister (5th) were overwhelmed with fear as their father faced immigration challenges—and then devastated when he was ultimately taken. Victory Schools stepped in to provide stability, compassion, and hope during this uncertain time. Teachers created a supportive environment where the siblings could express their feelings while still finding joy in learning and friendships. Staff encouraged resilience, reminded them of their strengths, and helped them hold onto a positive outlook for the future, even in the face of loss. Our main message to them was based on their father’s love for them, but also the love that still surrounded them at home and on campus.

Educators can mitigate these effects by prioritizing relational safety. Trauma-informed practices such as consistent morning greetings, daily check-ins, and mentorship connections with trusted adults provide reassurance and stability. Embedding social-emotional learning (SEL) helps students recognize and manage complex feelings, while character education reinforces values of compassion, kindness, and responsibility in peer interactions. Together, these practices provide children with both emotional tools and a community framework that supports trust and healing.

Cognitive Impact

Adjusting to a new language, culture, and educational system places heavy demands on a child's cognitive resources. Many immigrant children face difficulties sustaining attention, retaining information, or engaging academically while managing the stress of adaptation. Constant worry about family stability or legal status further taxes their ability to concentrate and solve problems, leading to inconsistent performance or disengagement in school (Gindling & Poggio, 2012). Too often, these challenges are misinterpreted as lack of effort or ability, rather than a natural response to overwhelming circumstances.

To reduce this cognitive overload, schools can apply trauma-informed instructional practices such as scaffolding tasks, using visual supports, and breaking down complex directions. Normalizing multilingualism as a strength reframes identity from deficit to asset, bolstering both engagement and confidence. Character education complements these approaches by nurturing perseverance, self-control, and a growth mindset, encouraging students to view challenges as opportunities for growth. By embedding both trauma-informed and character-building practices, educators help immigrant children re-engage with learning in ways that affirm both their intellect and their identity.

Physical and Neurological/Neurodevelopmental Impact

The physiological effects of immigration-related stress are profound. Prolonged activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis raises cortisol levels that disrupt the brain regions responsible for executive functioning, memory, and emotional regulation (McEwen & Gianaros, 2010). Children exposed to migration-related violence, unsafe journeys, or post-migration instability may show symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), including hyperarousal, sleep disturbances, and heightened threat responses (Fortuny & Chaudry, 2011). These stress patterns often appear in classrooms as hypervigilance, difficulty calming down, or avoidance of academic tasks.

Schools can buffer these neurobiological impacts by creating calm, predictable environments and embedding regulation strategies into the school day. Trauma-informed practices such as mindfulness routines, movement breaks, and sensory regulation tools give students ways to manage physiological responses. When combined with character education lessons that emphasize resilience, courage, and self-care, students learn to reframe stress responses while developing healthier coping skills. This dual approach ensures that immigrant children are supported not just academically, but as whole people: mind, body, and character.

Conclusion

Immigration is often a journey marked by hope, courage, and resilience, yet it can also bring deep trauma. The upheaval of leaving home, navigating unfamiliar systems, and facing discrimination can disrupt social connection, emotional attachment, cognitive focus, and even neurodevelopment.

Schools are uniquely positioned to be places of healing. By fostering belonging, honoring cultural identity, and providing consistent, caring relationships, educators can help immigrant children rebuild trust and stability. Through small daily acts of inclusion such as greeting students in their home language, showcasing cultural traditions, or pairing them with supportive peers, schools can affirm identity and create a foundation of safety. Intentional SEL practices, character education lessons on empathy and resilience, and trauma-informed approaches such as predictable routines and regulation strategies all work together to help children integrate their past, embrace their present, and imagine a hopeful future.

Additional support can further strengthen this safety net. Partnering with community organizations that specialize in immigrant and refugee services can connect families to legal aid, counseling, and basic resources. Providing bilingual liaisons or family engagement coordinators ensures that caregivers feel empowered and included in the school community. Schools can also create affinity groups or cultural clubs where students find solidarity, while offering leadership opportunities that affirm their voices. By layering these supports, educators not only mitigate the effects of immigration-related trauma but also nurture the courage, resilience, and brilliance immigrant children bring with them into the classroom.

Where to Get Additional Support

Supporting students impacted by immigration experiences requires a multi-layered network of school, family, and community resources. While educators play a vital role in fostering welcoming, inclusive, and culturally responsive classroom environments, external support is often essential to address the legal, emotional, and social complexities these students and their families face. The following organizations and research centers provide tools, training, and direct services specifically focused on understanding immigration as a form of trauma and offering practical strategies to support healing, resilience, and academic success.

American Immigration Council

Provides resources on immigrant rights, legal support, and advocacy. https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org

Catholic Charities USA – Immigration & Refugee Services

Offers legal services, resettlement support, counseling, and trauma recovery services across the U.S. https://www.catholiccharitiesusa.org

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS)

Specializes in refugee resettlement, family reunification, and trauma-informed services. https://www.lirs.org

Refugee Trauma and Resilience Center (Boston Children's Hospital/Harvard Medical School)

National center providing trauma-informed resources for children and families. https://redcap.link/rtrc

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)

Resources and referral networks for immigrant and refugee children experiencing trauma. https://www.nctsn.org

Activity K-2: "All Are Welcome Here – Celebrating Our Classroom Community"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will understand that everyone belongs in the classroom community, recognize ways people are the same and different, and name qualities they appreciate in themselves and others.	Belonging, kindness, empathy, respect, inclusivity	Builds psychological safety through affirming messages, uses concrete visuals to foster connection, provides choice in participation, and focuses on strengths rather than deficits.	Grades K-2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competency: Social Awareness & Relationship Skills – Demonstrating empathy and respect for others	Teacher observation of student engagement, completed "Welcome Hand" art project, and student responses during discussion.	Read-aloud book: All Are Welcome by Alexandra Penfold (or another inclusive community book) Chart paper or whiteboard for creating a "Ways We Are Alike / Ways We Are Different" list "Welcome Hand" template (outline of a hand on paper) or blank paper for students to trace their own hand Markers, crayons, or colored pencils	whole group read-aloud and discussion, individual art activity, optional sharing in small groups

Steps:

1. Warm-Up Discussion:
   - Gather students on the carpet and ask: "Have you ever gone somewhere new where you didn't know anyone? How did it feel?"
   - Validate feelings like nervousness, excitement, or curiosity.
   - Introduce the idea that our classroom is a place where everyone belongs, no matter where they are from or what language they speak.

2. Activity 1 – Read-Aloud:
   - Read All Are Welcome aloud.

   Pause to discuss:
   * What makes the children in the story feel welcome?
   * How do the characters show kindness to each other?
   * Can you think of a time someone made you feel welcome?

3. Activity 2 – Ways We Are Alike and Different:
   - On chart paper, make two columns: "Ways We Are Alike" and "Ways We Are Different."
   - Let students share ideas (examples: We all like to play; Some of us speak more than one language; We all have favorite foods, but they might be different).
   - Emphasize that differences make our classroom more interesting and special.

4. Activity 3 – Welcome Hands:
   - Give each student a hand outline (or have them trace their own).
   - Inside the hand, students draw or write one thing that makes them special or one way they can help others feel welcome.
   - Encourage colorful designs that show personality.
   - Sharing & Display: Students can share their hands with a partner or the group (optional).

- Collect all the hands and arrange them in a big circle or heart shape on the wall with a sign that says: "All Are Welcome Here."

Closing:

Remind students:
- Everyone has something special to bring to our classroom.
- We can make others feel welcome with kind words, smiles, and invitations to join in.
- Our differences are part of what makes our class strong.

Extension: Practice welcoming phrases in different languages represented in the class (e.g., Hola, Bienvenue, Marhaba).

Handouts:

"Welcome Hand" template

Activity K-2: "Stuffed Friends & Hearts that Travel"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
To help children understand that love and connection remain even when family members are far away or separated. To provide a safe way for children to express feelings of missing someone using comfort objects, stories, and symbols. To affirm that their emotions are valid and that relationships are a source of strength. To begin introducing the idea that small actions (words, drawings, symbols) can help them feel connected and safe.	Compassion, Trust, Respect, Empathy	This activity reinforces safety, relational connection, and emotional regulation. Through symbolic play with comfort objects and story-based reflection, children begin to process feelings of separation and belonging in a nurturing and predictable environment. The use of tangible symbols (hearts, strings, stuffed animals) helps externalize emotions, providing a safe pathway for expression without forcing disclosure.	Grades K–2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 2: Self-Management CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills Common Core ELA: RL.K–3, RL.K–7 Common Core ELA: RL1.3, RL1.7 Common Core ELA: RL2.3, RL2.6	Observed ability to identify emotions and sources of connection. Verbal or creative expression of emotion through art or discussion.	A children's book that validates belonging and resilience (see examples below) A stuffed animal or comfort item for each student Optional: Yarn or soft string (2–3 feet per child) Optional: Sentence strips Crayons, markers, or colored pencils Optional: Index Cards Quiet, comfortable reading space Recommended Book Examples (Choose books that validate belonging and resilience) Mango, Abuela, and Me by Meg Medina My Two Blankets by Irena Kobald	One-on-one or small group (2–4 children) with adult facilitator

Steps:

- Facilitator's Note: Please be aware—this session may stir deep emotions for children, especially those navigating grief, loss, or family separation due to immigration. Before delivering this activity, please ensure you have gained approval or consultation from your school's counseling department and/or leadership team. Engaging in trauma-informed dialogue with children is meaningful work, and it must be done with safeguards in place, clear follow-up plans, and alignment with your school's broader wellness supports. After the session, consider checking in with your mental health team or school social worker to share any observations or to debrief supportively.

1. Welcome and Opening (3–5 minutes)
   - Create a calm space for the activity with cozy seating or soft lighting.
   - Invite each child to bring their stuffed animal or comfort item, ideally in a space with soft seating or circle time rugs.
   - Open with a short breathing practice or soothing activity
     i.e., "Let's hug our stuffed animals close. Let's take three slow breaths together so our hearts feel calm."

2. Read-Aloud (10–15 minutes)
   - Read a selected children's book aloud to the child or group and their stuffed animals.
   - During reading, weave in reflective prompts:
     * "When someone moves to a new place, what might they worry about? What might give them hope?"
     * "What words or actions can help someone feel welcome?"
     * "How would you want to be seen if you were in their shoes?"

3. OPTIONAL: Reflection & Dignity Script Rewriting (10–15 minutes)
   Provide sentence stems on index cards:
   Sometimes people say... "Why don't you speak English?"
   Instead, we could say... "I'd love to learn your favorite word in your language."

   Sometimes people say... "Where are you really from?"
   Instead, we could say... "I'd love to hear more about your family's story and traditions."

   Sometimes people say... "Your lunch looks weird."
   Instead, we could say... "That smells delicious—what's your favorite food from home?"

   Sometimes people say... "Your name is too hard to say."
   Instead, we could say... "Can you teach me the right way to say your name? I want to get it right."

4. Invite pairs/small groups to practice rewriting scripts into dignity-centered, welcoming language.
Connect to immigration concerns by helping students understand that language can either include or exclude.

5. OPTIONAL: Symbol-Making: "Bridges of Belonging" (10 minutes)
   - Provide paper strips to build a class "bridge."
   - On each strip, students write a word or phrase that makes others feel safe, welcome, or strong.
   - Connect strips into a paper chain displayed as a bridge of belonging.

6. Expression & Sharing (Optional, 5–10 minutes)
   - Offer the child a chance to:
     * Tell their stuffed animal about the heart and string.
     * Share who their heart is connected to and why (if comfortable).
     * Listen to others in the group share, using a soft tone and affirming presence.

Closing:

Thank the students and their stuffed animals for participating. Offer to keep their heart and string in a safe classroom space, or place it in a take-home envelope.

Activity 3-5: "Bridges of Belonging"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
To help children reflect on how words and actions can either welcome or exclude peers, especially those from immigrant or displaced backgrounds. To practice rewriting scripts so their everyday language promotes dignity, empathy, and belonging. To recognize that everyone has a role in building safe and inclusive communities. To use symbolic action (Bridge of Belonging) to visually represent how supportive language connects people.	Compassion, Trust, Respect, Empathy, Humility, Responsibility	This activity reinforces voice, agency, and identity safety. Through guided storytelling and collaborative dialogue, children learn to recognize how language impacts belonging and dignity. Script-rewriting and bridge-building provide structured, predictable ways to process complex emotions while fostering empathy and relational trust. By practicing inclusive language, students strengthen their sense of control and contribute to a classroom culture of respect and care.	Grades 3-5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 2: Self-Management CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills CASEL Core 5: Responsible Decision-Making Common Core ELA: RL.K–3.3, RL.K–3.6 Common Core ELA: RL.K–4.2, RL-4..3, RL.K–4.6 Common Core ELA: RL.K–5.2, RL-5..3, RL.K–5.6	Observed ability to identify emotions and sources of connection. Verbal or creative expression of emotion through art or discussion.	A children's book that explores grief, connection, or emotional reassurance (see examples below) Optional: A stuffed animal or comfort item for each student, possibly one fidget toy per participant. Optional: Yarn or soft string (2–3 feet per child) Heart-shaped paper or simple cardstock cutouts Crayons, markers, or colored pencils Optional: Envelopes or ziplock bags for keepsake materials Quiet, comfortable reading space Recommended Book Examples (Use any story aligned to grief, connection, or emotional reassurance): Dreamers by Yuyi Morales The Name Jar by Yangsook Choi	One-on-one or small group (2–4 children) with adult facilitator

Steps:

- Facilitator's Note: Immigration-related trauma may include fear of separation, uncertainty, or grief. Be sure this lesson is scaffolded with wellness supports and check-ins. Before delivering this activity, please ensure you have gained approval or consultation from your school's counseling department and/or leadership team. Engaging in trauma-informed dialogue with children is meaningful work, and it must be done with safeguards in place, clear follow-up plans, and alignment with your school's broader wellness supports. After the session, consider checking in with your mental health team or school social worker to share any observations or to debrief supportively.

1. Welcome and Opening (3–5 minutes)

    - Create a calm space for the activity with cozy seating or soft lighting.

2. OPTIONAL: Invite each child to bring their stuffed animal or comfort item. Depending on age, a fidget toy may be less likely to result in unwanted peer attention or ridicule.

3. Practice a short mindfulness technique: i.e., "Put your hand on your heart. Imagine someone who loves you. Breathe in their love, breathe out your worry."

4. Read-Aloud (10–15 minutes)
    - Read a selected children's book aloud to the child or group and their stuffed animals.
    - Make the reading interactive and relational:
        * "Do you think your stuffed animal ever felt like that?"
        * "Who in the story feels connected, even when they're apart?"

5. OPTIONAL: Reflection & Symbol Making (10–12 minutes)
    - Pass out a heart cutout and a piece of yarn.
    - Ask students to:
        * Decorate the heart with drawings or names of someone they miss or love.
        * Tie one end of the string to the heart and the other around their stuffed animal's paw, hand, or scarf.
        * Explain that this is a symbol of connection—a reminder that love stays, even when people are far away or no longer present.

Closing:

- Invite volunteers to share one rewritten script or one bridge word.
- Close with: "Everyone deserves to feel safe and seen. The words we choose can build bridges through compassion, respect, trust, etc.."

Activity 3-5: “My Journey, My Strength – Recognizing Resilience Through Our Stories”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	**Character Traits Targeted:**	**Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:**	**Age Range:**
Students will explore personal strengths, build a sense of belonging, and identify ways their experiences have helped them grow.	Resilience, Empathy, Respect	Provides a safe, affirming environment for students to share at their own comfort level, validates diverse life experiences, and fosters connection through common values rather than focusing solely on differences.	Grades 3-5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness & Social Awareness – Recognizing personal experiences and appreciating the perspectives of others	Observation of participation, completion of “My Strengths Map” worksheet, reflective discussion contributions.	Read-aloud book or video about belonging and new beginnings (Lubna and Pebble by Wendy Meddour, The Name Jar by Yangsook Choi, or similar) “My Strengths Map” worksheet (students note strengths they have developed through life experiences) Chart paper/whiteboard for brainstorming “strength words” (e.g., brave, patient, caring)	whole group introduction, individual reflection, and optional partner/small group sharing

Steps:

1. Warm-Up Discussion:
   - Ask: “Have you ever been in a place where everything felt new — the people, the language, the food, even the way things looked?”
   - Let students share (verbally or with a partner) a time they had to adjust to something new.
   - Acknowledge that change can be exciting and challenging — and that it often helps us develop new strengths.

2. Activity 1 – Introducing Strength Words:
   - On chart paper, create a list of “strength words” with the class (examples: brave, curious, problem-solver, patient, kind, resilient, respectful, empathetic).
   - Briefly define each and connect them to real-life situations.

3. Activity 2 – Read-Aloud Connection:
   - Read the chosen book from the materials list or another of your choice.
   - Discuss:
     * What challenges did the main character face?
     * What strengths did they show?
     * How did others help them feel like they belonged?

4. Activity 3 – My Strengths Map:
   - Distribute the worksheet with a large “map” shape (e.g., a simple outline of a path or road).
   - Students fill the map with words or drawings of strengths they have developed through new or challenging experiences (moving to a new place, meeting new people, learning a new language, etc.).
   - They can add symbols or small illustrations that represent important moments or supports along the way.

5. Sharing & Group Reflection:
   - Students can share one strength from their map if they wish.
   - Discuss how different experiences help people grow in different ways and how everyone’s journey is valuable.

Closing:

- Remind students:
  * Every journey brings challenges and strengths.
  * Their experiences — including hard ones — help make them who they are.
  *They belong in the classroom community just as they are.

-Extension: Create a classroom “Strength Wall” with student contributions (words, drawings, or symbols) so that everyone’s strengths are represented.

Handouts:

My_Strengths_Map_Worksheet.pdf

Activity 6-8: “Threads That Connect Us – Exploring Identity and Belonging”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	**Character Traits Targeted:**	**Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:**	**Age Range:**
Students will reflect on their own identities, recognize shared human experiences, and appreciate the strengths and perspectives that come from diverse backgrounds, including immigration.	Empathy, Respect, Resilience	Creates a safe space for voluntary sharing, promotes validation of personal experiences, and emphasizes connection over differences. Encourages peer understanding to reduce isolation and build community trust.	Grades 6-8
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competency: Social Awareness & Self-Awareness – Recognizing and respecting diverse perspectives and understanding one's own identity	Observation of participation, completion of the “Identity Threads” worksheet, and depth of reflection during discussions.	Short video or poem about identity and belonging (e.g., Where I'm From poem by George Ella Lyon or a student-performed spoken word piece) “Identity Threads” worksheet (web or tapestry graphic with space for writing) Chart paper/whiteboard for shared ideas on connection points	whole group introduction, individual reflection, partner sharing, and optional group discussion

Steps:

1. Warm-Up Discussion:
   - Ask: “What makes up a person's identity? Is it just where they're from? The language they speak? Or is it more than that?”
   - Brainstorm as a class, listing answers like family traditions, hobbies, values, favorite foods, life experiences, etc.

2. Activity 1 – Identity Reflection:
   - Explain: “We each have many ‘threads’ that make up the fabric of who we are. Some threads come from our culture or heritage, others from experiences, challenges, and relationships.”
   - Show the short video or read the poem to spark thinking about personal stories. (e.g., Where I'm From poem by George Ella Lyon or a student-performed spoken word piece)

3. Activity 2 – Identity Threads Worksheet:
   - Give each student the worksheet showing a woven web/tapestry outline.
   - In each thread or space, students write or draw something that is part of who they are. This can include:
     * Personal strengths like empathy, respect, resilience, etc.
     * Cultural traditions
     * Skills or hobbies
     * Challenges they've overcome
     * People or places that shaped them
   - For students who have experienced immigration, they may include aspects of their journey if they choose, but they are not required to share personal details.

4. Activity 3 – Partner Connection:
   - Students choose a partner and share 2–3 “threads” from their worksheet.
   - As they listen, they identify at least one thing they have in common.

5. Group Reflection:
   - Invite volunteers to share commonalities they discovered with a partner.
   - Emphasize that even with different life stories, there are often shared experiences and values that connect us.

Closing:

Closing reminder:
- Every person's story is made of many threads.
- -Immigration and other big life changes can add unique strengths and perspectives.
- Finding connections helps build understanding and belonging.

Extension: Create a class “Tapestry Wall” where students contribute one decorated “thread” strip with a word or image that represents an important part of their identity. Combine the strips into a visual display.

Handouts:

Identity_Threads_Worksheet.pdf

Activity 9-12: “Bridges of Courage ”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	**Character Traits Targeted:**	**Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:**	**Age Range:**
Students will explore the experiences of immigrants, understand the challenges of being undocumented, and identify virtues like courage, empathy, resilience, and hope.	Courage, Resilience, Empathy, Hope	Focus on choice, safety, and emotional support. Avoid personal probing about students' family status. Normalize feelings, validate experiences, and encourage discussion in a safe space.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 2: Self-Management CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills	Offer flexible responses: drawing, verbal, or written for students who may struggle with writing due to trauma or language barriers. Focus feedback on effort, insight, and understanding rather than perfect artistic skill. Emphasize reflection and personal growth rather than competition. Participation & Engagement: Students actively participate in group discussions (share ideas, listen respectfully). Students engage with the drawing activity, completing at least one challenge and corresponding virtue on the bridge. Observation Notes: Did the student contribute thoughtfully to pair/small group discussions? Did they demonstrate curiosity or ask questions about immigration experiences and virtues? Understanding Virtues: Students can identify at least two virtues (e.g., courage, resilience) and explain why they are important for immigrants. Students show understanding of how virtues help overcome challenges. Assessment Tool: Reflection Worksheet or Journal Entry. Prompts: “Name the virtue(s) you chose and why.” “How do you think this virtue helps someone facing challenges like immigration?” Empathy & Reflection: Students demonstrate understanding of another person's perspective. Students can articulate an empathetic response, either verbally or in writing. Prompt: “Imagine you meet a new student whose family moved from another country. What can you do to show empathy and support?”	Circle of chairs Chart paper or journals Markers, pencils, or crayons “Virtue Cards” with Courage, Resilience, Empathy, Hope Age-appropriate stories, poems, or videos about children or families navigating life in a new place or facing challenges in their community (avoid direct references to ICE or raids if it could trigger fear). Here is a website of stories and poems: https://moore-english.com/11-paired-texts-about-the-immigrant-experience/	Small group/whole class

Steps:

1. Gentle Introduction (5–7 min)
   - Begin with a brief story (fictional or age-appropriate) about a young immigrant facing challenges in a new country from the website provided.
   - Ask students to reflect: “What virtues might someone need to face challenges like these?” Emphasize that everyone's journey is different and valid.

2. Virtue Exploration (10 min).
   - Give each student a “Virtue Card.” Students read their card and discuss in pairs or small groups:
   - How might this virtue help someone navigating life as an immigrant? Can you think of a time you or someone you know showed this virtue?

3. Bridge Drawing Activity (15 min).
   - Students draw a bridge on paper. On one side, write or draw challenges immigrants may face (language barriers, leaving home, fear of deportation, making new friends).
   - On the other side, write or draw virtues that help overcome these challenges. Encourage creativity. Students can use colors, symbols, or words to represent virtues and challenges.

4. Reflection & Sharing (10 min).
   - Invite students to share their bridges with the class or in small groups.
   - Encourage discussion: “How do these virtues help people face challenges?” “Which virtues do you think are most important, and why?”

Closing:

Closing (5 min). Circle Reflection: Gather students in a circle. Prompt: Ask each student to share one virtue they think is most important for someone facing challenges like immigration and one way they can practice that virtue in their own life. Affirmation: Highlight that every student can show courage, empathy, resilience, and hope in their daily actions, creating “bridges” of support for others. Positive Reinforcement: Thank students for their thoughtful reflections and remind them that learning about others' experiences helps build a kinder, more understanding community.

Optional Extension Assessment. “Virtue Action Card.” Students pick one virtue from their bridge and write down one concrete action they can take in the next week to practice it (e.g., helping a new student feel welcome, encouraging a friend, or showing patience). Collect cards (optional) and revisit next week to discuss how they practiced their virtues, reinforcing reflection and real-world application.

Handouts:

Activity 9-12: "Courage in Our Communities"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will explore stories of individuals who have faced challenges in moving to a new place and reflect on character traits and virtues like courage, resilience, empathy, and hope. They will connect these traits to their own strengths and ways to support others safely.	Self-awareness, courage, resilience, empathy, integrity, hope, self-respect	Emphasizes safety and anonymity; students are not required to share personal experiences. Focuses on strengths, resilience, and empowerment rather than fear or trauma. Encourages empathy and community awareness without putting students at risk. Provides choice and control in how they participate, ensuring emotional safety.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 2: Self-Management CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills	Formative Assessment (During the Activity). Observation: Teacher observes participation in discussion, noting whether students can identify traits (Courage, Resilience, Empathy, Hope, Kindness) in stories or community examples. Participation Check: Are students engaging with Virtue Cards, journaling, or contributing to discussions in a safe and thoughtful way? Guiding Questions: Can the student name at least one trait and give an example from a story or safe observation? Summative Assessment (After the Activity). Option 1: Strength Map Submission. Students submit their Strength Map, showing: Traits identified in stories, classroom experiences, or community examples. One personal example (safe, non-identifying) for each trait if possible. Option 2: Written Reflection Journal. Students respond to a Reflection Prompts Sheet, demonstrating: Understanding of traits and the ability to connect traits to real-life safe situations (observed in stories, media, or community).	Circle of chairs Age-appropriate stories, poems, or videos about children or families navigating life in a new place or facing challenges in their community (avoid direct references to ICE or raids if it could trigger fear). Here is a website of stories and poems: https://moore-english.com/11-paired-texts-about-the-immigrant-experience/ Chart paper or journals Markers, pencils, or crayons "Virtue Cards" with Courage, Resilience, Empathy, Hope, and Kindness	Small group/whole class

Steps:

1. Grounding & Safety Check (5 min).
   - Start with a brief mindfulness exercise: students take three deep breaths and focus on a safe, calm place in their mind.
   - Reassure students: "This is a safe space. You don't need to share anything you're not comfortable sharing. We are here to think about stories, traits, and how we can help each other."

2. Story Exploration (10–15 min).
   - Share a story about a child or family navigating challenges in a new place or adjusting to a difficult situation from the website provided.
   - Emphasize traits like courage, resilience, and hope. Avoid asking for personal immigration experiences to ensure safety.

3. Character & Virtue Connection (10 min).
   - List the traits: Courage, Resilience, Empathy, Hope. You may spend time discussing what these words mean and going over the virtue cards handout.
   - Discuss: "Which traits helped the characters face their challenges? How did they show bravery or kindness?"
   - Students can reflect on a time they showed courage or resilience in a safe context (like trying something new at school, standing up for a friend, or helping someone).

4. Reflection Activity (15 min).
   - Students journal or draw: A time they witnessed or learned about someone showing courage or hope; ways they can support friends, classmates, or community members safely.

5. Optional: Create a "Strength Map" of traits they see in themselves and others.

6. Sharing & Discussion (10 min).
   - Invite students to share reflections or maps if they feel comfortable. Discuss: "How can noticing courage and kindness in others help us build stronger, safer communities?"

7. Closing (5 min).
   - End with a positive affirmation: "I recognize my strengths and the strengths of those around me. I can show courage, hope, and kindness every day."

8. Optional: Students write one action they can take safely this week to practice a trait (like helping a friend or showing kindness at school).

Closing:

Closing (5 min). End with a positive affirmation: "I recognize my strengths and the strengths of those around me. I can show courage, hope, and kindness every day." Optional: Students write one action they can take safely this week to practice a trait (like helping a friend or showing kindness at school).

Optional Extension Assessment. Community Heroes Wall Contribution: Students contribute one example of a person (fictional, historical, or public figure) who exemplifies the traits. The teacher checks for correct identification of traits and thoughtful explanation.

Handouts:

Activity 9-12: “Crossing Paths – Understanding Journeys and Building Empathy”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	**Character Traits Targeted:**	**Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:**	**Age Range:**
Students will reflect on personal journeys, practice empathy through active listening, and explore how diversity strengthens communities.	Empathy, Respect, Resilience	Creates a choice-based sharing environment, validates diverse life experiences, focuses on strengths and resilience rather than trauma, and builds connection through respectful dialogue.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competencies: Social Awareness & Relationship Skills – Demonstrating empathy and understanding others’ perspectives	Observation of participation in discussion, quality of listening and engagement during partner shares, and depth of insight in written reflections.	Short video, poem, or story clip about migration, change, or belonging. Examples: Mona Elrayah: An Immigrant’s Story of Safety and Opportunity | TED Talk Nataly Galicia Castilio: Crossing Borders | TED Talk “Crossing Paths Reflection” worksheet (space for personal reflection, partner notes, and takeaways) Chart paper or whiteboard for group brainstorm	whole group intro, small group or partner activities, reflective journaling

Steps:

1. Warm-Up Discussion:
    - Ask: “What comes to mind when you hear the word journey?”
    - Invite students to share ideas beyond physical travel — like emotional growth, personal challenges, or learning experiences.
    - Explain that today’s focus is understanding journeys — our own and others’ — and how they shape who we are.

2. Activity 1 – Media Connection:
    - Show the selected short video, poem, or story clip.
    - Brief discussion prompts:
        * What challenges did the person face?
        * What strengths did they show along the way?
        * How did their journey change how they saw themselves or the world?

3. Activity 2 – Personal Reflection:
    - Distribute the “Crossing Paths Reflection” worksheet found under Handouts.
    - Students individually answer prompts such as:
        * Describe a time when you had to adapt to something new.
        * What strengths or skills helped you through it?
        * Who or what supported you during that time?
    - Emphasize that details are private unless students choose to share.

4. Activity 3 – Partner Share & Active Listening:
    - Students pair up. Each partner shares only what they are comfortable sharing from their reflection.
    - The listener’s role: no interruptions, no judgment, only clarifying questions.
    - After both share, each partner tells the other one thing they admire about their journey.

5. Activity 4 – Common Threads Discussion:
    - As a class, brainstorm “strengths people gain from their journeys” (examples: resilience, adaptability, empathy).
    - Record answers on chart paper or the board.

Closing:

Closing reminder:
- Everyone has a journey that shapes who they are.
- Listening with empathy and respect helps build understanding, resilience, and connection.
- Diversity of experiences makes our communities stronger.

Extension: Students create a “Strength Wall” in the classroom or online space where they anonymously contribute one strength they’ve gained from their journey.

Handouts:

Crossing_Paths_Reflection_Worksheet.pdf

Professional Development: "Bridging Cultures, Building Connections – Supporting Students with Immigration Experiences"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Educators will deepen their understanding of the unique challenges and strengths of students who have experienced immigration, learn trauma-informed strategies to support these students, and explore character education approaches that promote belonging and self-worth.	Empathy, Humility, Respect	Fosters a safe space for educators to discuss sensitive topics, promotes awareness of potential triggers, emphasizes relationship-building, and focuses on strength-based approaches.	Adults
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competency: Social Awareness & Relationship Skills – Recognizing diverse backgrounds and building supportive relationships Learning for Justice Social Justice Standards: Diversity & Action – Recognizing multiple identities and taking action to be inclusive	Participation in group discussions, quality of strategy generation, and post-session reflection submissions.	Short video or personal narrative from a student/educator about their immigration experience. Examples: What it's like to be the child of immigrants-Michael Rain Ted Talk "The Immigration Life" – StoryCorps Archive (audio with transcript) Invite a community guest speaker "Circle of Support" handout (visual framework for mapping student supports) Chart paper, markers, sticky notes Strengths Word Bank (optional, to help with asset-based thinking)	large group with small group breakout discussion

Steps:

1. Welcome & Framing (5 minutes)
   - Share: "Today's goal is to build our capacity to understand and support students who have experienced immigration, focusing on strengths, respect, empathy, and belonging."
   - Remind: This is a respectful, nonjudgmental space. Participation in personal sharing is optional.

2. Activity 1 – Story Connection (10 minutes)
   - Show the selected short video or invite a guest to share their immigration journey (with prior consent).
   - Ask participants to jot down:
     * Challenges they heard in the story
     * Strengths and resilience the student/individual demonstrated

3. Activity 2 – Silent Gallery Walk (10 minutes)
   - Post chart paper around the room with prompts:
     * What barriers might immigrant students face at school?
     * What strengths do these students often bring?
     * What practices in schools might unintentionally exclude them?
     * What practices build inclusion and trust?
   - Participants move around, adding sticky notes to each chart.

4. Activity 3 – The Circle of Support (20 minutes)
   - Distribute the "Circle of Support" handout (three concentric circles).
     Inner circle = people/relationships that build trust
     Middle circle = school structures and supports
     Outer circle = community connections/resources
   - In small groups, participants brainstorm specific supports for each circle that could help immigrant students feel safe, connected, and valued.
   - Encourage asset-based language (e.g., "multilingual learner" instead of "limited English").

5. Activity 4 – Strategy Swap (10 minutes)
   - Each group shares one practical, high-impact strategy from their circle with the whole group.
   - Capture these on a master list for post-session distribution.

Closing:

Closing reminder:
- Immigration experiences can bring both challenges and strengths to the classroom.
- Trust and belonging are foundational for learning.
- Trauma-informed, character-focused approaches help all students thrive, not just those with immigration backgrounds.

Extension: Form a "Culture & Belonging" working group to continue developing supports and to ensure inclusion practices are embedded schoolwide.

Handouts:

Circle of Support.pdf

Isolation

Isolation, whether caused by social exclusion, family disruption, prolonged illness, or community displacement, is a profound form of trauma that disrupts children's fundamental need for connection. Human development is inherently relational; children grow, learn, and thrive within secure attachments and social networks (Bowlby, 1988). When those connections are absent or severed, the brain perceives it as a threat to survival. Research shows that chronic isolation activates the same neural pathways associated with physical pain, underscoring its deeply traumatic impact (Eisenberger & Cole, 2012).

Cause of Trauma

Isolation may arise from several sources. Social isolation can occur when a child is excluded by peers, bullied, or stigmatized due to differences in ability, socioeconomic status, race, or other identity markers. Familial isolation results from parental neglect, incarceration, or inconsistent caregiving. Community and environmental isolation can stem from displacement, unsafe neighborhoods, or a lack of access to community spaces. Prolonged illness, disability, or events such as the COVID-19 pandemic have also contributed to developmental isolation, limiting children's access to normal social interactions during critical developmental windows (Loades et al., 2020).

When isolation is chronic, children lack the protective relational bonds that regulate stress and shape healthy attachment patterns. Without these anchors, they experience heightened vulnerability to emotional dysregulation, learning challenges, and social withdrawal (Van der Kolk, 2014).

VS Case Study - Isolation

A kindergarten student at Victory Schools struggled with isolation after moving to a new city and leaving behind familiar faces. She often played alone at recess and became hesitant to interact with peers. Victory teachers introduced the character pillar of compassion, modeling kindness and encouraging classmates to include her in group games. Through structured classroom activities and daily "acts of kindness," she began to see that others cared about her presence. She slowly built friendships and gained confidence to participate in circle time discussions. Teachers praised her efforts to both give and receive compassion, which created positive momentum. By mid-year, she was engaged in group learning and play. Her sense of isolation faded as she discovered the power of compassion in connecting with others.

Effects on Children

Social Impact

Social isolation chips away at the very skills children need to thrive in peer groups. A child who has been excluded or disconnected may start expecting rejection and withdraw before anyone even has the chance to reach out. Over time, they may lose practice with empathy, cooperation, and healthy conflict resolution, skills that are best learned through everyday play and interaction (Hartup & Rubin, 2013). When children lack opportunities to feel like they are part of a group, they often miss the sense of belonging that anchors both relationships and learning.

VS Case Study - Isolation

A fourth-grade boy at Victory Schools experienced trauma from prolonged isolation due to frequent moves and limited social interaction outside of school. He often appeared shy, hesitant to participate in group activities, and struggled to make friends. Victory teachers introduced the character pillar of compassion, encouraging him to both show kindness to others and accept kindness in return. Through small group activities, peer buddy programs, and classroom discussions about empathy, he gradually learned to connect with classmates and build trust. Teachers and counselors reinforced each step, celebrating his willingness to engage despite past experiences of isolation. Over time, he became more confident, formed meaningful friendships, and actively participated in class. Today, he thrives academically and socially, demonstrating how compassion can help overcome the effects of isolation.

Educators can intervene by intentionally restoring opportunities for connection. Trauma-informed practices such as structured buddy systems, class meetings, and collaborative projects ensure that no student is left to the margins. Character education deepens this by embedding lessons on kindness, respect, and responsibility, helping peers recognize the importance of inclusion. When schools create predictable rituals of welcome and community, they counter the narrative of rejection with one of belonging.

Emotional Impact

Isolation can leave a deep emotional imprint. Without steady relationships, children often wrestle with mistrust, keeping adults at a distance. Conversely, they may latch onto any available relationship out of fear of losing connection. This can fuel shame and loneliness, convincing children that they are unworthy of attention or affection (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2014). Left unchecked, these emotions don't just affect childhood, they can carry forward into adolescence and adulthood, shaping how individuals build intimacy and trust.

VS Case Study - Isolation

A tenth-grade female student at Victory Schools struggled with feelings of isolation stemming from social exclusion and past experiences of neglect. She often avoided participating in extracurricular activities and had difficulty advocating for herself in class. Victory teachers, alongside counselors, emphasized the character pillar of responsibility, helping her understand that she could take ownership of her actions and choices to improve her social and academic engagement. She began setting personal goals, such as joining a school club and reaching out to classmates for collaboration on projects. Over time, she demonstrated consistent effort to build relationships and actively contribute to the classroom community. By the end of the year, she had gained confidence, formed supportive friendships, and thrived both socially and academically. Responsibility empowered her to reclaim her place within the school community despite previous isolation.

Schools can buffer these effects by making emotional safety a daily practice. Trauma-informed approaches like emotion coaching, regular check-ins, and safe spaces give children permission to name and process their feelings. Layering character education into this work provides a moral and relational framework: compassion, empathy, and self-respect. When children hear, see, and practice these values daily, they begin to reimagine themselves as worthy of love and capable of healthy connection.

Cognitive Impact

The classroom is one of the first places where social interaction fuels learning. When isolation cuts off these opportunities, children lose access to the rich, language-heavy exchanges that build vocabulary, reasoning, and problem-solving. Research shows that children deprived of social learning environments often perform lower on measures of verbal ability, executive function, and academic readiness (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Teachers may notice these students sitting silently, avoiding group work, or struggling to keep pace with peers who are sharpening their skills through constant interaction.

Trauma-informed instruction can bridge this gap by scaffolding social learning into academic tasks. Structured cooperative learning, guided peer dialogue, and explicit teaching of collaboration skills make classrooms places where connection and cognition grow together. Through character education, educators can highlight perseverance and teamwork as virtues, reinforcing that learning is not just an individual pursuit but a shared journey. This dual approach strengthens both academic outcomes and a student's willingness to step back into community.

Physical and Neurological/Neurodevelopmental Impact

Isolation weighs on the heart and alters the body and brain. Chronic disconnection keeps the stress-response system activated, flooding the body with cortisol that disrupts memory, attention, and emotional regulation (McEwen & Gianaros, 2010). Brain imaging studies even show reduced connectivity in areas tied to social cognition and reward processing for children who experience prolonged isolation, making it harder to re-engage once disconnected (Tomova et al., 2020). Physically, this stress may appear as fatigue, headaches, or difficulty calming down, which in turn disrupts school engagement.

Schools can act as regulators of safety and calm. Trauma-informed practices such as mindfulness breaks, movement routines, and sensory regulation tools help children reset their nervous systems in community spaces rather than in isolation. Character education complements this by teaching resilience, courage, and self-care, giving students both the tools and the belief that they can manage stress and rejoin relationships. When schools provide predictable care for both body and mind, they rewrite isolation's message of exclusion into one of healing connection.

Conclusion

Isolation is not simply the absence of social interaction; it is a profound disruption of a child's most basic developmental need for connection. Social, emotional, cognitive, and even neurological development all depend on relationships. Chronic isolation signals to the brain that the child is unsafe, reinforcing survival responses that hinder trust, learning, and belonging.

The good news is that connection is healing. Predictable routines, caring relationships, and intentional opportunities for belonging can rewire the brain and repair the relational damage caused by isolation. Educators have a unique ability to be that secure base and offer students the connection they need to engage, learn, and thrive in community.

Where to Get Additional Support for Students and Families Experiencing Isolation

Supporting students who experience isolation requires a partnership between schools, families, and community organizations to intentionally rebuild connection and belonging. Educators may find the following resources especially helpful:

School Counselors and Social Workers – Provide group counseling, social skills groups, and one-on-one check-ins to help students rebuild connection and practice relational skills.

StopBullying.gov – Offers resources for addressing peer rejection, bullying, and social exclusion, along with strategies to foster inclusive school climates. https://www.stopbullying.gov

Child Mind Institute – Provides guides and articles on helping children who are withdrawn, lonely, or struggling with peer relationships, with resources for parents and educators. https://childmind.org

CASEL (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning) – Offers frameworks and practical tools for building classroom belonging through SEL practices. https://casel.org

American Academy of Pediatrics – HealthyChildren.org – Includes resources on children's mental health, loneliness, and fostering resilience in school and home settings. https://www.healthychildren.org

Sesame Street in Communities – Friendship & Belonging – Free videos, activities, and caregiver supports that promote inclusion and social connection for younger children. https://sesamestreetincommunities.org

Activity K-2: "My Friendship Garden – Growing Connections Together"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will identify ways to connect with others, recognize their own friendship qualities, and practice including peers in play and conversation.	Kindness, Empathy	Creates a predictable, safe environment for participation; uses visual and hands-on components; offers choice in sharing to protect emotional safety; emphasizes	Grades K–2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competency: Relationship Skills – Establishing and maintaining healthy relationships	Observation of participation, completed "Friendship Flower" worksheet, and student ability to name ways to connect with others.	"Friendship Flower" worksheet (center circle for self, petals for qualities that make them a good friend) Chart paper or board for group brainstorm of "Ways to Make a Friend" Crayons, markers, or colored pencils Optional: Small paper cut-out flowers for a class "Friendship Garden" display	small group, or counseling session whole group introduction, individual creative activity, small group sharing

Steps:

1. Warm-Up Discussion:
   - Ask: "What makes a good friend?" and "How does it feel when someone includes you?"
   - Record student answers to build a "Friendship Qualities" list on chart paper.

2. Activity 1 – Ways to Make a Friend:
   - Brainstorm together small, kind actions that help start a friendship (e.g., say hello, share a toy, ask to play).
   - Keep the list posted in the classroom as a reminder.

3. Activity 2 – Friendship Flower Worksheet:
   - In the center circle, students draw themselves.
   - On each petal, they write or draw one quality that makes them a good friend (e.g., "I share," "I help," "I listen").
   - Encourage them to use colors and creativity.

4. Activity 3 – Partner or Small Group Sharing:
   - Students share their flowers with a partner or small group, highlighting one quality they are proud of.
   - Encourage peers to give positive feedback ("I like that you are a good listener").

5. Activity 4 – Class Friendship Garden (Optional):
   - Collect flowers and display them together to show how everyone's friendship qualities create a caring classroom.

Closing:

Closing reminder:
- Everyone has special qualities that can make others feel happy and included.
- Small acts of kindness help friendships grow.
- We can all plant seeds of friendship every day.

Extension: Have students choose one "friendship action" from the brainstorm list to try during recess or free time. Check in later to see how it went.

Handouts:

Friendship_Flower_Worksheet.pdf

Activity 3-5: "Invisible to Seen – Finding Our Place in the Circle"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will explore feelings of being left out or unseen, identify personal strengths, and practice inclusive behaviors that help everyone feel like they belong.	Empathy, Kindness, Courage	Uses a safe and predictable story framework, validates student experiences, incorporates visual storytelling to reduce barriers for participation, and builds relational safety through structured peer sharing.	Grades 3-5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competency: Social Awareness – Recognizing the feelings and perspectives of others	Teacher observation during discussions, completed "Belonging Circle" worksheet, and student self-reflection on actions they can take to include others.	Picture book: The Invisible Boy by Trudy Ludwig (or similar book addressing isolation and belonging) "Belonging Circle" worksheet – student draws themselves in a circle and adds names or qualities of people who help them feel included Chart paper or whiteboard for "Ways We Include Others" brainstorm Crayons, markers, or colored pencils	small group, or counseling whole group read-aloud, partner or small group discussion, and individual reflection activity

Steps:

1. Warm-Up Discussion:
   - Ask: "Have you ever felt invisible or left out? What did that feel like?"
   - Acknowledge that sometimes feeling left out can hurt, but we can take steps to help ourselves and others feel included.

2. Read-Aloud:
   - Read The Invisible Boy aloud, showing illustrations. Pause at key moments to ask:
     "How do you think Brian feels right now?"
     "What did someone do to help him feel seen?"

3. Activity 1 – Class Brainstorm:
   - On the board, make a list of "Ways We Include Others" (e.g., inviting someone to join a game, saying hello, asking someone's opinion, sitting with someone at lunch).

4. Activity 2 – Belonging Circle Worksheet:
   - In the center circle, students draw themselves.
   - Around them, write or draw people, places, or activities that help them feel like they belong.
   - Encourage inclusion of both peers and adults (e.g., "my teacher," "my cousin," "the art club").

5. Activity 3 – Partner Sharing:
   - Students share their Belonging Circle with a partner, pointing out one person or activity that makes them feel valued.
   - Partners respond with one kind comment or affirmation.

6. Optional Extension – Inclusion Challenge: Challenge students to use one "inclusion action" from the brainstorm list during recess or class that week.

Closing:

Closing message:
- Everyone has the power to help someone else feel seen.
- Feeling connected helps us grow and learn together.
- Even small actions can make a big difference.

Extension: Create a bulletin board titled “In Our Circle” with students’ Belonging Circles displayed.

Handouts:

Belonging_Circle_Worksheet.pdf

Activity 6-8: “Better Together: The Secret Language of Aspen Trees”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will explore the benefits of social connection, identify parallels between human experiences and nature, and discover ways to create an inclusive community for themselves and others.	Empathy, Kindness	Relational safety with structured group sharing, rituals of belonging, and peer empathy.	Grades 6-8
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competencies - Social Awareness Relationship Skills Self Awareness	Teacher observation during discussions and deliverables from each group (choice of written, acted, or drawn assignment).	2 printed Aspen Tree articles per group, along with teacher access to CDC article Art supplies for each group: Paper Markers Paint Colored pencils Whiteboard for full class discussions	Group

Steps:

1. Read the objective as a class and then divide the class into groups of 3-4 students before beginning the lesson.

2. WARM UP (Group):
   - Write the following reflection question on the board before beginning the lesson:
   - What are some things that are better when they are together? Get creative! List as many as you can with your group (i.e., Peanut butter & jelly, guitar and drums, pack of wolves, etc.). 5-10 min timer for the warm-up.

3. WHOLE CLASS:
   - After the timer is up, encourage the groups to share their list with the class, writing each distinct pair/group on the board. Encourage some whole-class discussion around why each pairing/group is better together vs. in isolation.

4. GROUP:
   - Give each group a printed copy of the Aspen tree articles. Have each group elect at least one SUMMARIZER, one ARTIST, and one SPOKESPERSON. One role may have 2 students working together. Write their roles on the board:
     * SUMMARIZER(S) (1-2 students) - After reading the articles as a group, write a brief 2-3 sentence summary on each of the articles.
     * ARTIST(S) (1-2 students) - Draw a picture, create a poem, or act out the ways Aspen trees thrive on connection and depict how this relates to our human experience/needs for connection.
     * SPOKESPERSON (1 student) - Be prepared to share the summary and chosen artwork created by your group.

5. WHOLE CLASS:
   - Come together as a class. Give each group’s SPOKESPERSON 2-3 minutes to share a summary/art with the class.

Closing:

Once presentations are completed, share a few stats and facts from the CDC regarding the impact of social isolation. Encourage class discussion around ways to support connections in school.

Consider the following questions:

- In what ways do you remain socially connected and nurture the relationships in your own life, showing empathy and kindness?
- What are ways you might include someone if you noticed they often sit alone?

Handouts:

Printed Articles for each group:
https://treefluent.com/are-all-aspen-trees-connected/

https://lifesciences.byu.edu/shared-roots-and-survival-in-the-quaking-aspen

Social Isolation and Risk Factors (for teacher use during lesson closing):
https://www.cdc.gov/social-connectedness/risk-factors/index.html

Activity 6-8: "Building My Bridge Back to Connection – Reconnecting After Isolation"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will identify safe and supportive relationships, practice strategies for re-engaging socially, and build empathy for peers who may feel excluded or disconnected.	Empathy, Kindness, Resilience	Establishes emotional safety by allowing choice in sharing, focuses on student strengths, uses structured and predictable routines to reduce anxiety, and intentionally builds relational trust.	Grades 6-8
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competency: Relationship Skills & Social Awareness – Building and maintaining healthy relationships and understanding others' perspectives	Observation of engagement during group activities, completion of the "Connection Bridge Map" worksheet, and reflection responses.	Connection Bridge Map" worksheet (two sides of a bridge labeled "Where I Am Now" and "Where I Want to Be," with space for "Steps" along the bridge) Chart paper or whiteboard for brainstorming "Ways We Build Connection" Optional: Positive affirmation cards to use during closing	advisory, or small group

Steps:

1. Warm-Up Discussion:
   - Ask: "What does it mean to feel connected to others? How do you know when you feel like you belong?"
   - Record responses on the board to highlight emotional and behavioral signs of connection (e.g., smiling more, feeling included in conversation, wanting to come to school).

2. Activity 1 – Understanding Bridges to Connection:
   - Share: "Sometimes we all feel disconnected or alone. Today, we're going to think about ways to build bridges back to people and activities that help us feel connected."
   - Brainstorm as a class: "What are some ways people can help each other feel included?" (e.g., greeting someone by name, inviting them into a game or conversation, asking how they are doing, showing them empathy and kindess).

3. Activity 2 – Connection Bridge Map Worksheet:
   - Students complete their own worksheet:
     * Left side ("Where I Am Now") – Draw or list how they currently feel about connection (e.g., "I sit alone at lunch," "I have one close friend," "I'm nervous to join clubs").
     * Right side ("Where I Want to Be") – Describe their goal for connection (e.g., "Join a school club," "Talk to 2 new people a week," "Have a study partner in math").
     * Bridge Steps – Write small, realistic actions to help them move from where they are now to where they want to be.

4. Activity 3 – Small Group Sharing (Optional):
   - In small groups, students can share one step from their bridge map.
   - Group members offer encouraging ideas or affirmations.

5. Activity 4 – Class Connection Commitment:
   - As a group, decide on 3–5 simple ways the class can make sure everyone feels included each day (e.g., "We greet each other by name," "We invite people into our groups," "We use kind words"). Post in the classroom as a visual reminder.

Closing:

Closing reminder:
- Connection is built one small step at a time.
- We all have the power to make others feel included and valued.
- Reaching out can help us feel more connected, even if it feels hard at first.

Extension: Encourage students to track one "connection moment" each day for a week (either something they did to connect with others or something someone did for them).

Handouts:

Connection_Bridge_Map_Worksheet.pdf

Professional Development: "Commendation Loop"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
To foster a sense of belonging and emotional safety by providing regular, public opportunities for staff to affirm and be affirmed. To promote a culture of shared mission and values, reducing professional isolation and increasing staff morale—key protective factors for mental well-being. To deepen understanding and embodiment of virtues, sub-virtues, and shared language through lived examples that reinforce identity, purpose, and positive self-regard. To support the emotional resilience of educators by cultivating joy, gratitude, and connection in the work environment, especially during periods of stress or fatigue.	Gratitude, Humility	This activity is designed to enhance predictability, relational trust, and belonging in the adult community. Consistent recognition and virtue-aligned affirmation contribute to emotional regulation, shared purpose, and collective resilience.	Adult educators and support staff
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 3: Social Awareness CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills CASEL Core 5: Responsible Decision-Making	N/A	Email platform (e.g., Outlook, Gmail) Access to organization's distribution list Working Document for weekly planning Organization's list of values, virtues, or standards	Group-based virtual community-building.

Steps:

1. Weekly Email Launch
   - Campus Instructional Leader sends an email to organization's distribution list
   - Email includes a short, joyful "hook" (e.g., train imagery or celebratory tone).
   - Clearly name the weekly virtue, value, standard or shared language focus.
   - Embed an Exemplary Shoutout
   - Include 1–2 standout examples of a staff member, fellow, or facilities team member who exemplified the week's virtue, value, standard in action.
   - Explain how the behavior is connected to virtue, value, or standard in practical terms.

2. Staff Response & Engagement
   - Invite staff to reply-all with their own shoutouts throughout the week.
   - Remind them that shoutouts may highlight others or themselves as a form of healthy self-recognition.

3. Incentivize and Celebrate
   - Optionally call out shoutouts during Staff Morning Meetings.
   - Save standout examples for the End-of-Year video or gallery.

4. Sustain Momentum
   - For the first six weeks and after extended breaks, proactively embed or solicit an exemplary shoutout to kickstart engagement.

Closing:

Incorporate Shoutouts into formal campus celebrations, such as team meetings or newsletters. Consider closing the year with a printed or digital collection of shoutouts for each staff member as a reflection of community culture.

Extension Ideas:

Add shoutout visuals to shared spaces (e.g., staff lounge bulletin boards).
Host an opportunity where standout shoutouts are celebrated.

Professional Development: "From Alone to Belonging – Recognizing and Responding to Student Isolation"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	**Character Traits Targeted:**	**Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:**	**Age Range:**
Increase educator awareness of the signs and impacts of isolation on student learning and behavior. Equip educators with trauma-informed strategies to build relational safety and belonging for isolated students. Foster a collaborative schoolwide culture of inclusion.	Empathy, Compassion, Responsibility	Builds educator understanding of the relational nature of learning. Highlights the neurological and emotional effects of chronic isolation. Provides specific, safe, and predictable strategies to re-engage disconnected students.	Professional Development session for teachers, support staff, or school leaders
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competency: Social Awareness – Recognizing and respecting the perspectives of others.	Participant reflection and discussion contributions; facilitator observation of ability to identify strategies	"Through Their Eyes" Student Narrative for Read-Aloud (see below) Chart paper or whiteboard Markers Timer or clock for pacing discussions Optional: space for small-group circles	Can be done as a faculty meeting activity, in-service session, or department/team training.

Steps:

1. Opening (5 minutes): "Through Their Eyes"
   - Facilitator reads a short first-person narrative (fictionalized composite) of a student experiencing isolation in school. See below for sample narrative.
   - Prompt: "What do you notice about this student's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors?"
   - Write key words/phrases on the board (e.g., "invisible," "withdrawn," "anxious," "lonely").
   - Understanding the Impact (10 minutes): Brief Research Overview
   - Facilitator gives a concise overview of, or facilitates discussion around, how isolation impacts students socially, emotionally, cognitively, and neurologically.
   - Link this to trauma theory: "Isolation is a relational wound; connection is the healing agent."

2. Small Group Discussion (10 minutes): "Signals of Isolation"
   - In table groups or small circles, educators identify observable signs that a student may be experiencing isolation (e.g., avoids group work, eats alone, never initiates conversation, frequent absenteeism).
   - Groups share out, and the facilitator records responses in a visible "Signals of Isolation" chart.

3. Strategy Brainstorm (15 minutes): "Bridge-Building Moves"
   - Still in groups, educators brainstorm specific, trauma-informed ways to connect with isolated students.
   - Examples: predictable greetings, structured peer partners, invitation to join clubs, affirming the student's strengths in front of others, restorative check-ins.
   - The facilitator adds strategies to a "Bridge-Building Moves" list on chart paper.

4. Commitment Round (10 minutes): "One Small Step"
   - Each educator identifies one action they will take in the next two weeks to foster belonging for a specific student.
   - Go around the room (verbal or pass the talking piece) to share commitments aloud.

Closing:

Closing reflection: "Connection is not a program—it's a daily practice. Even one consistent, caring adult can begin to heal the wounds of isolation."

Extension:

- At a follow-up meeting, educators share what happened when they implemented their "one small step."
- Build a schoolwide "Connection Tracker" to ensure each student has at least one intentional adult connection daily.

Examples:

Through Their Eyes – Student Narrative (Read-Aloud)

*"I walk into the cafeteria, tray in my hands, and my chest tightens.
The tables are full—at least, they look full to me.
I spot a corner seat near some kids from my class, but no one looks up.
I keep moving.
My food tastes like cardboard when I finally sit down alone.
I try not to notice the laughter across the room—it's not for me.
They don't even know my name.
In class, I keep my head down. If I answer a question wrong, I can feel eyes on me, so I stop trying.
Sometimes I want to raise my hand, but my voice feels stuck.
I wonder if anyone would notice if I wasn't here tomorrow.
I wish someone would just say, 'Hey, come sit with us.'
Maybe then I'd feel like I belonged."*

Facilitator Notes for Use:

- After reading, pause for 5–10 seconds of silence.
- Ask:
  * "What emotions did you hear in this student's story?"
  * "What behaviors might a teacher see from this student?"
  * "If this student were in your class, what is one thing you could do to help them feel seen?"

Loss and Abandonment

Loss, whether through death, abandonment, foster care placement, incarceration of a caregiver, or other forms of separation, can be one of the most profound and life-altering traumas a young person experiences. Loss disrupts a child's sense of safety, belonging, and stability, creating emotional and relational challenges that may persist across the lifespan (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2022). Unlike temporary changes, these separations alter a child's daily reality and may trigger a cascade of emotional, cognitive, and physical responses rooted in grief, fear, and uncertainty (Worden, 2018).

Loss takes many forms:

- Death of a parent, sibling, or close caregiver due to illness, accident, suicide, or violence.
- Abandonment through voluntary or involuntary absence, such as parental substance use, incarceration, or deportation.
- Extended separation in foster care, kinship care, or residential programs.

Recent data from The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2022) reports that more than 1 in 14 U.S. children have experienced the death of a parent or sibling before age 18. The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2021) estimates that over 400,000 children are in foster care each year, with many entering due to abuse, neglect, or abandonment. These children are at heightened risk for post-traumatic stress symptoms, depression, and academic disruption (NCTSN, 2022).

VS Case Study - Loss and Abandonment

An eighth-grade male student at Victory Schools faced significant trauma after experiencing the loss of a close family member and feelings of abandonment from other relatives. These experiences left him withdrawn, mistrustful of peers, and hesitant to participate in class activities. Victory teachers and counselors introduced the character pillar of tolerance, helping him understand how to accept difficult situations and regulate his emotions while remaining open to others. Through structured classroom discussions, guided reflection exercises, and peer collaboration, he learned to manage frustration and engage respectfully with classmates. Small successes, such as joining group projects and sharing ideas, were celebrated to reinforce growth. Over time, he developed stronger social connections, increased confidence, and improved academic engagement. Today, he thrives in the classroom, demonstrating that tolerance can help students navigate emotional challenges and build resilience.

Loss is not a single event but a process. Children often re-experience grief at developmental milestones, such as graduations, birthdays, or transitions, making support a long-term need. For some, grief is compounded by secondary adversities, such as financial instability, stigma, or multiple relocations. Trauma-informed and character education approaches together can provide the stability, compassion, and moral framework that help students heal, rebuild trust, and form healthy identities.

Causes of Trauma

Loss causes trauma when the separation or absence disrupts a child's primary attachment relationships and the bonds that provide security, nurture, and identity. The sudden or prolonged absence of a trusted adult can trigger feelings of fear, abandonment, and self-blame (Bowlby, 1980; NCTSN, 2022). These reactions are intensified when the loss is accompanied by uncertainty (e.g., not knowing if or when a parent will return) or when it is sudden and violent.

Chronic grief can overwhelm a child's coping mechanisms, leading to prolonged stress responses that affect physical and mental health. For example, ambiguous loss when a person is physically absent but psychologically present, or physically present but emotionally unavailable can create unresolved grief that complicates healing (Boss, 2006).

Trauma-informed frameworks emphasize the importance of safety, trustworthiness, empowerment, collaboration, and cultural responsiveness (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014) in supporting grieving students. Integrating character education ensures that students not only receive emotional support but also learn and practice traits such as empathy, perseverance, hope, and compassion, which are all qualities that help them navigate grief and rebuild a sense of meaning.

Effects on Children

Social Impact

Loss can create a heavy silence in a child's social world. Students may quietly step back from friendships or avoid group activities because they feel no one else understands what they are going through. A child who has lost a parent, sibling, or caregiver may carry an invisible weight that makes them feel "different" from their classmates (NCTSN, 2022). When loss carries stigma, such as the death of a parent through violence or incarceration, trust in peers can be further eroded. Over time, this social withdrawal can deprive children of the very connections that might help them heal.

Educators can intervene by building safe and intentional spaces for belonging. Small-group projects, peer buddy programs, and restorative circles invite grieving students back into the community at a pace that feels manageable. Character education lessons on kindness, respect, and inclusion remind all students that friendship is not conditional on circumstances. When schools model inclusive language and behaviors, they create classrooms where grief is not hidden but compassion is practiced.

Emotional Impact

The emotional toll of loss is profound and unpredictable. Children may cycle through sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, and numbness, sometimes all in a single day. Younger students often fear more losses will follow, while adolescents may wrestle with questions about meaning, fairness, and identity (Worden, 2018). Grief can also resurface unexpectedly at anniversaries, holidays, or milestones, reawakening emotions teachers thought had settled. These emotional waves can make students appear moody or withdrawn, masking a deeper struggle to regain equilibrium.

Schools can provide anchor points of safety through consistent check-ins, calm-down spaces, and restorative conversations. Trauma-informed educators know that grief is not linear and normalize the reappearance of strong emotions. Activities like gratitude journals, resilience stories, or SEL routines give children language and structure for their feelings. When paired with character lessons in hope, perseverance, and gratitude, these practices offer students reassurance that painful emotions can coexist with growth and meaning.

Cognitive Impact

Grief affects not only emotional well-being but also cognitive functioning. Students may find themselves staring at a page without comprehension, forgetting simple instructions, or losing focus during lessons. The cognitive load of processing grief leaves little bandwidth for learning, and even high-achieving students may show sudden dips in attention, organization, or academic stamina (Currier et al., 2012). These changes can be misinterpreted as laziness or defiance rather than an expected response to emotional pain.

Educators can lighten this cognitive burden through flexible deadlines, scaffolding, and chunked assignments that make learning feel attainable. Trauma-informed teachers also know to give grief space, pairing structure with grace. Linking executive function skills like planning and organization to moral traits such as responsibility and self-discipline reframes academic persistence as both a cognitive and a character goal. This connection helps grieving students recognize that working through challenges is not only about finishing assignments, but also about developing the inner strength to persevere.

Physical Impact

Loss is carried in the body as much as in the mind. Students may experience sleep disruptions, lowered immunity, or somatic symptoms like stomachaches, headaches, and fatigue (Stroebe et al., 2007). Appetite changes or low energy may make it hard for them to participate fully in daily school routines. For some children, these physical manifestations become a quiet cry for help, signaling stress that words cannot express.

Schools can buffer these physical effects by embedding wellness practices into the day. Movement breaks, breathing routines, and mindfulness exercises offer students concrete ways to calm their bodies and re-engage with learning. Coupling these strategies with character lessons on self-care and respect for one's body reframes physical well-being as a foundation for resilience. When students learn that caring for their health is both necessary and honorable, they begin to see self-care as part of healing rather than weakness.

Personal Impact

Loss reshapes a child's sense of self. Feelings of abandonment can feed into self-blame, convincing students that they are unworthy of love or destined for further loss. Adolescents, especially, may struggle with existential questions about their purpose or moral identity, wondering who they are without the person they have lost. This search can feel disorienting but is also an opportunity for growth.

Educators can support students' identity reconstruction by highlighting strengths, offering affirmations, and recognizing effort as well as achievement. Character education themes such as courage, integrity, and purpose provide scaffolds for rebuilding a positive self-concept. Literature, storytelling, and role models who have overcome hardship give grieving students narratives of resilience to draw on. In this way, loss becomes not only something endured but also a catalyst for the redefinition of self around enduring values.

Academic Impact

Grief often interrupts the steady rhythm of schoolwork. Students may show dips in grades, miss more days of school, or struggle to engage in long-term projects that require sustained motivation (Dyregrov, 2008). These disruptions are not reflections of diminished intelligence but natural consequences of emotional and physical exhaustion. Left unaddressed, academic setbacks can compound grief by fueling shame or frustration.

Teachers and schools can act as bridges during this season. Collaborating with families, counselors, and support staff ensures that academic expectations are adjusted without sacrificing growth. Trauma-informed approaches allow flexibility while maintaining high, compassionate expectations. Infusing lessons with moral themes like perseverance and responsibility helps students see that academic effort during grief is not about perfection, but about honoring values that will sustain them throughout life.

Conclusion

Loss alters every dimension of a child's world: relationships, emotions, cognition, health, self-concept, and academics. While grief is a natural process, it can become overwhelming when children lack stable support or when their pain goes unacknowledged. Schools are uniquely positioned to serve as anchors of safety, predictability, and compassion. Through trauma-informed practices, educators can provide consistent routines, relational safety, and gentle flexibility. Character education adds another layer by highlighting courage, hope, and resilience, helping children see themselves not only as survivors of loss but also as individuals with the strength to grow. With intentional support, grieving students can rediscover belonging, rebuild trust, and find meaning in the face of hardship.

Where to Get Additional Support for Students and Families Experiencing Loss

Supporting grieving children requires collaboration between schools, families, and community organizations. The following resources provide guidance, strategies, and age-appropriate tools:

The Dougy Center – National center for grieving children and families, offering toolkits, activities, and resources for schools. https://www.dougy.org

National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) – Resources on childhood grief, trauma, and evidence-based interventions for educators and caregivers. https://www.nctsn.org

Child Bereavement UK – Practical guides and activities for helping children process grief, including resources for schools. https://www.childbereavementuk.org

National Alliance for Children's Grief (NACG) – Offers professional development, resource libraries, and program directories for grief support. https://childrengrieve.org

Winston's Wish – UK-based but widely used resources for children experiencing loss, including free downloadable guides. https://www.winstonswish.org

Sesame Street in Communities – Grief – Developmentally appropriate videos, activities, and caregiver tools for younger children. https://sesamestreetincommunities.org/topics/grief

Activity K-3: "My Little Light – A Lantern of Love and Hope"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Help children recognize that even after loss, they still carry love and light inside them. Provide a safe, creative way to remember something or someone special. Build a classroom sense of kindness and care.	Hope, kindness, empathy, resilience, love	Gentle metaphor to support understanding of grief and hope. Allows choice in what is shared and how. Creates a calming, safe, and predictable routine.	Grades K–3
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness – Recognizing and naming feelings	Teacher observation of engagement, student reflection through drawing.	White paper cups or small paper bags (lunch size) Battery-operated tea lights (one per student) Markers, crayons, stickers Optional: You Are Light by Aaron Becker or The Invisible String by Patrice Karst as a read-aloud	individual creation with optional group sharing

Steps:

1. Story Introduction (5 minutes)
   - Read You Are Light (or The Invisible String for connection) and talk about how love and hope can shine like a little light inside of us.
   - Say: "Even when sad things happen, we carry special memories and hopes that help us feel safe and happy again."

2. Feelings and Hopes Discussion (3 minutes)
   - Ask: "What makes you feel warm and happy inside?" (Examples: a hug, playing outside, remembering a pet, thinking of a favorite person).
   - Emphasize that it's okay to have both happy and sad feelings at the same time.

3. Lantern Making (10 minutes)
   - Give each child a paper cup or bag.
   - On the outside, have them draw or decorate with pictures of things/people that make them feel loved or happy.
   - Place a tea light inside when they're ready.

4. Shining Our Lights (Optional, 5 minutes)
   - Dim the classroom lights and have each student hold their lantern as the tea lights glow.
   - The teacher says: "Your light is always with you. When we share kindness, we make the world brighter."

Closing:

Optional: discuss other ways to shine our lights and share kindness or show empathy for others. You may need to share the meaning of these words first.

Kindness means being friendly, caring, and helpful to others.
It's doing or saying something that makes someone feel good, like sharing, helping a friend, or using kind words.
Example: When you see someone drop their crayons and you help pick them up, that's kindness

Empathy means understanding how someone else feels and caring about their feelings. It's like putting yourself in their shoes and thinking about what might make them feel better.
Example: If your friend is sad because they lost a game, you might say, "It's okay, I'll play with you," because you know how it feels to be sad too.

Extension: Keep the lanterns on a "Hope Shelf" in the classroom for students to see when they need comfort.

Home connection: Send a note home encouraging families to ask their child to share their lantern story.

Activity K-3: "Our Invisible Strings – Staying Connected Through Love and Memory"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Help children understand that love and connection remain even when someone is not physically present. Provide a safe space to acknowledge feelings of loss. Foster a classroom culture of empathy and care.	Empathy, kindness, resilience, compassion	Uses gentle storytelling to introduce the concept of ongoing connection. Gives children multiple participation choices to reduce emotional overwhelm. Focuses on safety and relational trust with consistent, clear routines.	Grades K–3
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness & Relationship Skills – Recognizing feelings and building caring relationships.	Teacher observation of participation, respectful listening, and sharing of connection ideas.	The Invisible String by Patrice Karst (book or video) Ball of yarn or string (for optional group activity) Chart paper and markers	whole-group read-aloud with individual reflection and optional sharing

Steps:

1. Introduction (3 minutes)
   Begin by telling students: "Sometimes we can't be with the people we love, but that doesn't mean they stop being important to us. Today we'll read a story about how love keeps us connected, even when we are far apart."

2. Read-Aloud (10 minutes)
   - Read The Invisible String.
   - Pause occasionally to ask:
     "What do you think the invisible string means?"
     "How do the characters feel when they remember the string?"

3. Discussion – Who's on Your String? (5 minutes)
   - On chart paper, write: "People, pets, and places we are connected to."
   - Invite students to name examples (real or imagined) that make them feel loved or safe.
   - Acknowledge any students who choose not to share aloud.

4. Movement Connection Activity (5 minutes, optional)
   - Gather the class in a circle. Hold one end of a ball of yarn and say the name of someone you feel connected to.
   - Pass the yarn to another student, who says their connection and holds a part of the yarn.
   - Continue until everyone is holding part of the yarn, creating a visible "web" of connection.
   - End by noting: "Even when we're apart, we're still connected."

5. Closing Reflection (2 minutes)
   - Ask: "What's one thing you can do to help someone feel connected this week?"
   - If appropriate, you can connect the responses to kindness, compassion and empathy.
   - Thank students for courageously sharing and listening respectfully. Remind them: "Our strings are always there, even when we can't see them."

Closing:

Extension: Students can draw themselves with invisible strings connecting to the people or pets they love (optional take-home activity).

Classroom display: Create a "Class Connection Web" with yarn or string to show how the class is connected to one another.

Activity K-4: “Stuffed Friends & Strings of Love”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	**Character Traits Targeted:**	**Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:**	**Age Range:**
To help children explore and express feelings related to grief, loss, or abandonment in a developmentally appropriate, emotionally safe way. To reinforce the idea that love and connection can remain even in the face of separation or change. To support emotional processing and regulation through a trusted adult presence, meaningful symbols, and comforting rituals.	Love, Trust, Resilience, Empathy	This activity reinforces safety, relational connection, and emotional regulation. Through symbolic play and story-based reflection, children begin to process complex emotions in a nurturing and predictable environment.	Ages 3–10
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 2: Self-Management CASEL Core 3: Social Awareness Common Core ELA: RL.K-2.1, RL.K-2.3 (listening, comprehension, and emotional response)	Observed ability to identify emotions and sources of connection. Willingness to engage with the symbolic “string” or speak about loved ones. Verbal or creative expression of emotion through art or discussion.	A children’s book that explores love, loss, connection, grief, or hope (see examples below) A stuffed animal or comfort item for each student Optional: Yarn or soft string (2–3 feet per child) Heart-shaped paper or simple cardstock cutouts Crayons, markers, or colored pencils Optional: Envelopes or ziplock bags for keepsake materials Quiet, comfortable reading space Recommended Book Examples (Use any story aligned to grief, connection, or emotional reassurance): The Invisible String by Patrice Karst Ida, Always by Caron Levis The Memory Tree by Britta Teckentrup The Rabbit Listened by Cori Doerrfeld Love Waves by Rosemary Wells My Heart by Corinna Luyken Big Cat, Little Cat by Elisha Cooper	One-on-one or small group (2–4 children) with adult facilitator

Steps:

- Facilitator’s Note: Please be aware this session may stir deep emotions for children, especially those who have experienced loss or are navigating grief. Before delivering this activity, please ensure you have gained approval or consultation from your school’s counseling department and/or leadership team.

- Engaging in trauma-informed dialogue with children is meaningful work and it must be done with safeguards in place, clear follow-up plans, and alignment with your school’s broader wellness supports. After the session, consider checking in with your mental health team or school social worker to share any observations or to debrief supportively.

1. Welcome and Opening (3–5 minutes)
    - Create a calm space for the activity with cozy seating or soft lighting.
    - Invite each child to bring their stuffed animal or comfort item.
    - Open with a short breathing practice or soothing activity
        i.e., “Let’s take three slow breaths with our stuffed friends.”

2. Read-Aloud (10–15 minutes)
    - Read a selected children’s book aloud to the child or group and their stuffed animals.
    - Make the reading interactive and relational:
        * “Do you think your stuffed animal ever felt like that?”
        * “Who in the story feels connected, even when they’re apart?”

3. OPTIONAL: Reflection & Symbol Making (10–12 minutes)
    - Pass out a heart cutout and a piece of yarn.
    - Ask students to:
        * Decorate the heart with drawings or names of someone they miss or love.
        * Tie one end of the string to the heart and the other around their stuffed animal’s paw, hand, or scarf.
        * Explain that this is a symbol of connection—a reminder that love stays, even when people are far away or no longer present.

4. Expression & Sharing (Optional, 5–10 minutes)
    - Offer the child a chance to:
        * Tell their stuffed animal about the heart and string.
        * Share who their heart is connected to and why (if comfortable).
        * Listen to others in the group share, using a soft tone and affirming presence.

Closing:

Thank the students and their stuffed animals for participating. Offer to keep their heart and string in a safe classroom space, or place it in a take-home envelope.

Activity 4-8: "Memory and Strength Garden – Honoring the Past, Growing for the Future"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Help students impacted by loss acknowledge their feelings in a safe, structured way. Build awareness of personal strengths and coping strategies. Encourage peer empathy and community connection.	Resilience, empathy, hope, respect	Creates emotional safety by offering choice in participation. Validates grief as a natural, personal process. Uses symbolic, creative expression to support healing.	Grades 4-8
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness & Relationship Skills – Recognizing emotions, developing healthy relationships.	Observation of participation, reflections shared verbally or visually; self-reported coping strategies.	Chart paper or whiteboard for group brainstorming Markers, crayons, or colored pencils Small pieces of paper or index cards shaped like petals or leaves (pre-cut) Optional: Music for a calm atmosphere	adaptable for individual or group settings

Steps:

1. Opening Circle (5 minutes)
    - Teacher explains: "Today we're going to think about things or people we've lost, how that has felt, and how we can keep memories and strengths alive. You choose how much you share—listening is just as important as speaking."
    - Establish group agreements: respect, no interrupting, permission to pass, confidentiality.

2. Brainstorm – "What Helps" (5 minutes)
    - As a group, list ways people cope with loss (e.g., talking to a trusted person, remembering happy times, engaging in a hobby, helping others).
    - Emphasize that coping looks different for everyone.
    - You may discuss ways to support others coping with loss and how to be empathetic (for example: active listening, being present, offering support, kindness)

3. Creative Expression – "Garden of Memory and Strength" (15 minutes)
    - Give each student several paper petals/leaves.
    - On some petals/leaves, they can write or draw a memory of the person/thing they lost (optional for those not ready to share).
    - On others, they write or draw personal strengths or coping strategies they have used or want to try.
    - Students decorate petals/leaves however they choose.

4. Building the Garden (10 minutes)
    - On a wall or bulletin board, arrange the petals/leaves around a large drawn flower or tree trunk labeled "We Remember, We Grow."
    - Students can choose to place their petals anonymously.

5. Sharing (Optional, 10 minutes)
    - Invite volunteers to share one petal/leaf that represents a strength or coping strategy.
    - Encourage peers to respond with supportive comments ("That's a great idea," "I like that strategy").

Closing:

Closing thought: "Loss changes us, but it doesn't take away our ability to grow. We can carry the memories with us while building new strengths."

Extension:
- Continue to add petals/leaves to the garden over time.
- Pair with literature (e.g., The Invisible String by Patrice Karst for younger students or Bridge to Terabithia by Katherine Paterson for older students).

Activity 4-12: "My Hope Lantern – Lighting the Way Forward"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Provide a safe and symbolic way for students to honor their loss while imagining hope for the future. Encourage students to identify personal strengths, sources of support, and dreams. Foster empathy and shared humanity among peers.	Resilience, optimism, courage, empathy, hope	Balances acknowledgment of loss with forward-looking hope. Uses symbolic art as a safe way to express complex emotions. Offers choice in sharing to respect emotional readiness.	Grades 4-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness & Responsible Decision-Making – Identifying emotions, setting goals, and making constructive choices.	Student participation in reflection and completion of their "hope lantern," either physically or verbally.	Paper lanterns or large white paper cups (or printable lantern templates) Battery-operated tea lights Markers, crayons, colored pencils Optional: calming instrumental background music	individual reflection with optional group sharing

Steps:

1. Opening Conversation (5 minutes)
    - Say: "Sometimes when life changes because of loss, it can feel like we're in the dark. But we each carry light—our strengths, memories, and dreams—that can guide us forward.
    - Today we'll make lanterns that represent our hope."
    - Establish emotional safety agreements through discussion and sharing of ideas. For example: permission to pass, respect for others, confidentiality, what empathy looks like when supporting others, having courage to speak and share.

2. Guided Reflection (5 minutes)
    - Prompt students to silently think or jot notes about:
        * A strength they have that helps them keep going.
        * One memory or value they want to carry with them.
        * A hope or dream for their future.

3. Lantern Creation (15 minutes)
    - On the outside of the lantern or paper cup, students draw or write symbols of their strength, memories, and hopes.
    - Inside the lantern, place the battery-operated tea light.
    - Emphasize: "The light inside is like the light in you—it's always there, even when it's hard to see."

4. Optional Sharing Circle (10 minutes)
    - Students may hold up their lanterns and share one part of what they drew/wrote (or just show it silently).
    - Encourage peer affirmations: "Thank you for sharing," "That's inspiring," etc.

Closing:

Closing message: "Loss is part of our story, but it's not the end of our story. We can carry our light forward and use it to guide ourselves and others."

Extension ideas:
- Create a "Hall of Lanterns" display for students who choose to share their lantern publicly.
- Repeat the activity at the end of the school year so students can reflect on how their hopes have grown.

Professional Development: "Holding Space for Grief – Supporting Students Through Loss"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Increase teacher awareness of how loss impacts students' emotions, behavior, and learning. Equip educators with trauma-informed, relationship-centered strategies to support grieving students. Build teacher confidence in responding to signs of grief and loss in a sensitive, appropriate way.	Empathy, compassion, patience, respect	Recognizes grief as an ongoing process, not a single event. Emphasizes relational safety, predictable supports, and emotional validation. Promotes culturally responsive understanding of grief and loss.	Professional Development session for teachers, support staff, or school leaders
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness & Social Awareness – Recognizing emotions in self and others; understanding diverse perspectives.	Participation in discussions, ability to identify observable grief-related behaviors, and selection of at least one actionable support strategy. Students correctly categorize behaviors as helpful or hurtful.	Chart paper or whiteboard Markers Optional: a quiet, calm space for the session (consider softer lighting or circle seating)	Whole-group PD with small-group discussion

Steps:

1. Opening Reflection (5 minutes): "A Time I Noticed Loss"
   - Facilitator prompts: "Think of a time in your teaching career when you noticed a student was going through something difficult related to loss. What did you see, and how did you respond?"
   - Invite a few volunteers to share (optional).

2. Understanding the Impact (10 minutes)
   - Brief overview of the effects of loss on children and adolescents:
     * Emotional: sadness, anger, numbness, guilt, fear
     * Behavioral: withdrawal, acting out, inconsistent work completion
     * Cognitive: difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, lowered academic performance
     * Physical: fatigue, headaches, changes in eating/sleeping patterns
   - Emphasize that grief may appear in waves over months or years.

3. Small Group Discussion (10 minutes): "Signals and Stories"
   - In groups, list observable signs a student may be struggling with loss.
   - Discuss how these signs may differ by age and cultural background.
   - Share insights with the whole group; facilitator records on chart paper.

4. Strategy Brainstorm (15 minutes): "What Helps"
   - In groups, generate specific trauma-informed strategies to support grieving students:
   - Predictable routines and structure. (shows respect)
   - Safe spaces for emotional regulation. (shows compassion)
   - Flexible deadlines or workload adjustments. (shows patience, respect, grace)
   - Check-ins from a trusted adult. (shows compassion & empathy)
   - Acknowledgment of important dates (anniversaries, birthdays). (shows compassion & respect)
   - Add ideas to a shared "Grief-Support Toolbox" list on chart paper.

5. Commitment Round (10 minutes): "One Thing I'll Do"
   - Each participant chooses one strategy they will intentionally apply with a student in the coming weeks.
   - Share aloud or write on a visible "Commitment Wall" for accountability.

Closing:

Closing message: "We can't take away a student's loss, but we can make sure they never feel alone in it. Our presence is powerful."
Extension:
   - Follow-up session for staff to share successes and challenges in implementing their strategies.
   - Consider inviting a school counselor or grief specialist to deepen staff understanding.

Mental Health and Student Well-Being

Student mental well-being is foundational to academic success, social development, and long-term life outcomes. Mental health challenges among students are rarely isolated; rather, they emerge from the complex interplay between personal experiences, environmental factors, and social contexts. Students with multiple ACEs are at a heightened risk for mental health difficulties, including anxiety and depression, as well as academic challenges and long-term physical health problems (CDC, 2021). Schools increasingly recognize that promoting mental well-being is essential for learning, engagement, and healthy relationships (Aspen Institute, 2019). Many students arrive at school carrying emotional burdens from home or their community, including stressors that may not be immediately visible but can significantly affect concentration, trust in adults, and peer interactions.

Recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2022) highlight a concerning rise in anxiety and depression among adolescents, with nearly one-third reporting persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness. These mental health challenges can impact attendance, engagement, and social functioning in school, emphasizing the need for proactive, comprehensive support. While issues such as peer conflict and bullying remain relevant, current trends show that anxiety, depression, and stress-related concerns are among the most common and pressing challenges affecting student well-being (CDC, 2023).

In addition to anxiety and depression, schools should to pay close attention to other mental health concerns that deeply affect students. Eating disorders, suicidal thoughts, and challenges with self-esteem are becoming more common among youth and can show up in the classroom through frequent absences, difficulty concentrating, or withdrawing from peers and activities (Mental Health America, n.d.; NCES, 2022). Low self-esteem is especially important to recognize because it has been linked to both being the target of bullying and engaging in bullying behavior, which means it can influence the overall climate of a school (Tsaousis, 2016; Zhong et al., 2021). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021) also point out that adverse childhood experiences can increase the risk of self-harm and developing eating disorders, making it even harder for students to cope with the normal demands of school life. These concerns show why schools must respond with a whole-child approach that goes beyond academics and discipline to also focus on emotional and social needs. Using trauma-informed practices along with intentional character education gives schools practical ways to recognize early warning signs, provide the right supports, and help students build resilience before challenges grow more severe (ASCA, 2023; NCTSN, 2021).
Implementing trauma-informed practices in schools allows educators to respond to these challenges more effectively. This approach involves shifting from reactive discipline to proactive understanding and from isolated interventions to coordinated support systems that create safe, predictable, and empowering environments (SAMHSA, 2014; American School Counselor Association, 2023). When paired with character education, trauma-informed practices do more than address adversity, they also cultivate internal strengths such as empathy, integrity, perseverance, and respect, which reinforce resilience and positive decision-making (Character.org, 2023).

Schools that foster belonging, shared values, and positive connections see improvements in engagement, attendance, and overall behavior (Aspen Institute, 2019). Encouraging supportive relationships with peers and adults serves as a protective factor against anxiety, depression, and other stress-related challenges (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2021). Additionally, physical health, nutrition, and opportunities for movement contribute to cognitive readiness and emotional regulation. A school climate that prioritizes inclusivity, respect, and diversity strengthens students' sense of identity and emotional safety, benefiting all learners, not only those who have experienced trauma.
Supporting student mental well-being requires collaboration among educators, families, and community agencies to create a network of care. Early identification and timely intervention for mental health challenges are critical for preventing escalation and promoting better long-term outcomes, particularly for students struggling with anxiety, depression, or stress-related difficulties (NCTSN, 2021).

VS Case Study - Mental Well Being

In second grade, a student struggled with mental well-being in ways that were hard to express at such a young age.This was also newer territory for the classroom teacher and administration due to the age of the student, as were more used to dealing with these tyoe of instances in older students. Recognizing how difficult it was for her to put feelings into words, Victory Schools relied on close observation, gentle guidance, and consistent support to help her feel safe and understood. Teachers introduced simple coping mechanisms such as breathing exercises, drawing to express emotions, taking short breaks when overwhelmed, and using calm-down corners in the classroom. With these tools and steady encouragement, the student gradually began to show signs of growth—smiling more often, engaging with peers, and participating with confidence in class. By the end of the year, her progress reflected the power of patience, care, and early support.

Effects on Children

Social Impact

Trauma can also impact social-emotional development. Students who have experienced adversity may struggle to form trusting relationships, misinterpret social cues, or withdraw to protect themselves from further harm (SAMHSA, 2014). While these behaviors are adaptive in unsafe environments, they can be misread as defiance or aloofness in school. For example, a student who has endured chronic neglect might distance themselves from peers not out of dislike, but because past experiences have taught them that closeness often results in pain (NCTSN, 2021). Depression and suicidal thoughts can further isolate students and lead them to hide from peers, avoid group activities, or disengage from friendships altogether (NCES, 2022; Child Mind Institute, 2021). Students with eating disorders may also withdraw socially because of shame, secrecy, or fear of being judged, which undermines their sense of belonging and connection (Mental Health America, n.d.; CDC, 2021). Low self-esteem makes these challenges even harder since students who view themselves negatively are less likely to seek out or sustain supportive relationships and may become targets of bullying or participate in harmful peer dynamics (Tsaousis, 2016; Zhong et al., 2021).

Over time these patterns of avoidance and mistrust can weaken resilience and reduce opportunities for positive peer influence, both of which are essential for healthy development (Harvard University Center on the Developing Child, 2021; Aspen Institute, 2019). Trauma-informed practices and character education can help counter these effects by teaching empathy, modeling healthy connections, and creating safe spaces where students feel supported in rebuilding trust and engaging with others (ASCA, 2023; Character.org, 2023; NCTSN, 2021).

Addressing these challenges requires intentional support for mental health and social-emotional development. Character education offers one pathway, helping students cultivate internal strengths such as empathy, resilience, kindness, and integrity (Aspen Institute, 2019; Character.org, 2023).

VS Case Studies - Mental Well Being

We had a student in our school who selected to be mute as a way to isolate and not engage with any of his peers. This student first came to us in 2022, and was placed in a life skills classroom because the student did not want to show what they were able to do. After consistently being there for the family and the students, this student said his first words to his classmate during the 24/25 school year. Currently, this student has a huge friend group, will be taking general education credit courses, and is on track to graduate with a high school diploma. This student went from isolation and not speaking to presenting to the entire class and developing friendships, all due to never giving up.

VS Case Study - Mental Well Being

A fifth-grade male student at Victory Schools struggled with ongoing challenges related to mental well-being, including anxiety and difficulty focusing on schoolwork. These challenges often caused him to withdraw from class participation and social interactions with peers. Victory teachers and counselors introduced the character pillar of self-discipline, helping him develop routines and coping strategies to manage his emotions and academic responsibilities. Through daily check-ins, structured study times, and mindfulness exercises, he learned to set small, achievable goals and follow through consistently. Teachers reinforced his efforts with praise and reflection activities, helping him see progress even during challenging days. Over time, he became more engaged in class, participated actively in group work, and built stronger relationships with peers. Today, he demonstrates resilience and improved focus, showing that self-discipline can empower students to navigate mental well-being challenges while thriving academically and socially.

Schools can create structured opportunities for students to practice these values, fostering safe, trusting relationships and promoting coping skills that buffer against anxiety, depression, and other stress-related challenges. For example, restorative circles, peer mentoring programs, and guided reflection activities can help students process emotions, build supportive peer networks, and develop problem-solving skills applicable both in and out of school.

Emotional Impact

Students experiencing trauma-related stress, including anxiety and depression, may face challenges with self-esteem, emotional regulation, and peer interactions. While bullying can intensify these effects, broader mental health concerns are increasingly prevalent. Research shows that students dealing with chronic stress or adverse experiences are at higher risk for depression, feelings of hopelessness, and social withdrawal (Durlak et al., 2022; CDC, 2023). These challenges can impact attendance, engagement, and academic performance, as well as long-term mental health outcomes.
Proactively supporting emotional well-being in schools can mitigate these risks. Integrating emotional literacy into character education programs helps students recognize, understand, and express their own emotions while developing empathy for others (Character.org, 2021). This foundational skill set strengthens social connections and contributes to a supportive school climate, which serves as a protective factor against stress, anxiety, and depression.

Trauma-informed approaches emphasize emotional regulation and connection rather than solely focusing on discipline. Classrooms may include calm corners equipped with sensory tools such as stress balls, weighted lap pads, coloring materials, or breathing guides, helping students regain a sense of control when overwhelmed. Mindfulness breaks, grounding exercises, and daily check-ins through brief conversations or mood boards provide students structured opportunities to process emotions before frustration escalates (University of Washington, 2021).

For example, a middle school that begins each day with a two-minute guided breathing or visualization exercise helps students enter the learning space calmer and more focused. Teachers trained in trauma-informed practices can interpret emotional outbursts as signals of distress rather than defiance, responding with empathy, restorative conversations, and problem-solving strategies (American School Counselor Association, 2023). Over time, these practices have been associated with fewer behavioral referrals and stronger student-teacher relationships, demonstrating the benefits of emotionally responsive teaching.

By viewing emotional regulation as a skill to be developed rather than an innate trait, educators foster a learning environment where all students, including those with trauma histories, can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Cognitive Impact

Repeated stress or exposure to adverse experiences can also affect cognitive performance. Cognitive difficulties, such as a student who was once engaged and confident may begin forgetting assignments, missing deadlines, or zoning out during lessons, are often misunderstood. Students may be misdiagnosed with attention disorders or unfairly labeled as unmotivated when they are actually coping with the neurological impacts of chronic stress (Mental Health America, n.d.). Misinterpretation can lead to inappropriate interventions, punitive measures, or lowered expectations, compounding the student's academic and emotional challenges.

Trauma-informed teaching addresses these challenges by reducing cognitive load and providing structured, predictable learning environments. Predictability counteracts the uncertainty often caused by trauma, allowing students to focus more mental energy on learning. Simple strategies such as posting a daily agenda in a consistent location, using clear verbal cues for transitions, and breaking assignments into smaller, manageable steps can make a significant difference. Visual supports like graphic organizers and color-coded charts help students organize information in ways that align with how the brain processes memory under stress. Flexible seating options give students some control over their learning space, helping them feel safer and more engaged (Avery et al., 2020).

Character education supports cognitive development by fostering habits of mind that encourage resilience and learning. Traits such as curiosity, perseverance, responsibility, and self-control help students approach academic challenges with a growth mindset rather than a fear of failure (Character.org, 2021). For example, a teacher might explicitly praise a group of students who worked through a difficult math problem, emphasizing not only the correct answer but also the persistence and teamwork involved. Over time, these positive reinforcements strengthen both cognitive stamina and the belief that abilities can improve through effort.

An example of integrating character education with cognitive skills could involve elementary students keeping learning journals in science lessons. Students might document not only what they learned but also how they problem-solved when experiments did not go as planned. Teachers could celebrate these moments as examples of persistence and creative thinking, reinforcing the idea that mistakes are part of learning rather than signs of failure. This intentional connection between academics and character development helps students build the executive functioning skills needed to succeed despite the cognitive challenges that trauma can cause.

Physical Impact

Students' mental health concerns often show up not only in their emotions and behaviors but also in their physical health. Anxiety, depression, and trauma can manifest as headaches, stomachaches, fatigue, and other physical complaints that may not have a clear medical cause (Child Mind Institute, 2021; CDC, 2021). These challenges can interfere with attendance, focus, and participation in school, sometimes making it difficult for students to stay engaged in both academics and peer relationships (NCES, 2022; Mental Health America, n.d.). Understanding these physical signs is an important first step in creating school environments that respond to the whole child and help students feel safe, supported, and ready to learn.

Schools play a critical role in addressing the physical impacts of trauma. Trauma-sensitive physical education programs recognize that some students may feel unsafe in competitive or high-contact activities and instead emphasize movement that promotes safety, inclusion, and emotional regulation. Activities such as yoga, stretching, walking, and low-pressure team games help students release stored tension and improve focus. Short movement breaks throughout the day, such as stretching, dancing, or guided breathing between lessons, can reduce stress and help reset students' attention.

Character education complements physical wellness strategies by fostering habits such as self-discipline, responsibility, and respect for one's body. Lessons on self-discipline can encourage healthy sleep habits, while responsibility can be linked to making nutritious food choices and engaging in regular physical activity (Character.org, 2021). Schools that integrate nutrition education with character lessons offer a holistic approach to student wellness. For instance, a fifth-grade class could hold a "Wellness Week" in which students learn about balanced diets, hydration, and exercise, alongside discussions on how caring for the body demonstrates respect for oneself and others.

An example of applying these strategies is introducing short "energizer breaks" between academic lessons. These five-minute sessions could include light stretching, guided breathing, or brief physical activities such as jumping jacks, allowing students to reset both physically and mentally before moving on to the next subject. Teachers may observe improvements in student focus and reductions in classroom tension, supporting emotional regulation and energy management. When these routines are paired with ongoing conversations about self-care and respect for the body, schools create an environment that prioritizes physical well-being alongside academic and social growth.

Personal Impact

Research consistently links low self-esteem with negative social interactions. Students who doubt their self-worth may be more vulnerable to peer rejection and may also engage in negative behaviors to assert control or mask vulnerability (Zhong et al., 2021). This cycle reinforces negative self-perceptions and can further isolate students from supportive relationships.

Fortunately, the aspects of identity affected by trauma can be rebuilt through intentional, strengths-based approaches. Character education provides a framework for fostering self-respect, empathy, and a sense of purpose. Emphasizing positive character strengths such as integrity, perseverance, and kindness helps students redefine themselves beyond their traumatic experiences (Aminah, 2024).

Practical strategies to strengthen a student's sense of identity often begin with self-reflection. Journaling exercises that encourage students to write about personal strengths, moments of pride, or future goals can shift focus from past harm to future possibilities. Service learning projects, such as organizing a school clean-up, planting a community garden, or assembling care packages for those in need, allow students to see themselves as valuable contributors capable of making a difference. These activities reinforce the message that they possess worth and agency.

Leadership opportunities within schools provide additional healing experiences. Participation in student council, peer mentoring, or leading classroom activities allows students to feel trusted, capable, and respected. In one high school, a peer leadership program paired upperclassmen with new students to provide academic and emotional support during their transition. Teachers observed that many peer leaders who previously struggled with self-esteem began to thrive when given responsibility and recognition.

By combining trauma-informed practices with character education, schools can support students in recovering from trauma and building a strong, positive sense of identity. When students learn to see themselves as resilient individuals with meaningful contributions, the benefits extend beyond the classroom and enhance relationships, academic engagement, and long-term aspirations.

Academic Impact

Mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and chronic stress can have profound effects on students' academic performance. Students experiencing depression often struggle with feelings of inadequacy, low motivation, or hopelessness, which can result in incomplete assignments, missed deadlines, or avoidance of challenging tasks (NCES, 2022; Child Mind Institute, 2021). Anxiety and trauma can interfere with attention, working memory, and executive functioning, making it difficult for students to follow multi-step instructions, stay organized, or maintain focus during lessons (Mental Health America, n.d.; Cammack et al., 2022). These difficulties can create a cycle in which students fall behind academically, internalize a sense of failure, and further lower their self-esteem, which in turn exacerbates emotional distress and disengagement from learning. Chronic absenteeism, classroom withdrawal, and reduced participation in group activities are often additional consequences of these mental health struggles, limiting opportunities for social learning and peer interaction (NCES, 2022; CDC, 2021).

By implementing trauma-informed academic strategies, individualized academic support, and character education that emphasizes perseverance, growth mindset, and self-efficacy, schools can help students rebuild confidence, develop executive functioning skills, and regain a sense of mastery over their learning despite personal challenges (ASCA, 2023; Aspen Institute, 2019). Proactively addressing mental health in the classroom not only improves academic outcomes but also strengthens resilience and promotes long-term well-being for students facing complex emotional and social challenges. These physical and social-emotional challenges often extend into the classroom, affecting students' ability to engage with lessons, complete assignments, and participate fully in academic and peer learning opportunities.

Trauma-informed academic environments seek to change the pattern by prioritizing emotional safety and viewing challenging behaviors as forms of communication rather than defiance. This perspective transforms discipline into opportunities for problem-solving and skill development rather than punishment. When combined with character education emphasizing responsibility, integrity, perseverance, and a growth mindset, students receive both the tools and encouragement needed to re-engage academically despite personal difficulties (Aspen Institute, 2019).

For example, if a high school replaced suspensions with restorative practices as part of a trauma-informed discipline framework, students would meet with trained facilitators instead of being sent home. In these meetings, they would discuss the incidents, reflect on their impact, and develop plans to repair any harm caused. This approach would be paired with academic mentoring, where students receive targeted support in organizing assignments, setting goals, and rebuilding confidence. Within a year, the school could see fewer suspensions, improved attendance, and higher credit recovery rates among students with trauma histories.

Similarly, if an elementary classroom incorporated flexible seating, scheduled movement breaks, and integrated social-emotional learning, it could effectively maintain student engagement despite external stressors. By recognizing that academic success is closely connected to emotional well-being, schools can create environments where students are seen not for their trauma but for their capacity to grow beyond it.

Where to Get Additional Support

Supporting student mental well-being requires more than good intentions. It relies on access to high-quality resources and practical, evidence-based strategies that educators can consistently apply in their daily work. Schools face the challenge of addressing not only academic growth but also the emotional and social needs of students, many of whom have experienced trauma, adversity, or chronic stress. Fortunately, several free and research-based resources exist to guide educators and school leaders in creating environments that are both trauma-informed and grounded in character education.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network offers school toolkits designed to help educators recognize and respond to trauma with sensitivity and effectiveness. These toolkits include training materials as well as adaptable policy templates that schools can modify to meet their unique contexts. Similarly, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) provides a trauma-informed framework that helps educators understand how trauma affects brain development and learning and provides strategies to foster resilience and emotional safety in the classroom.

Character.org provides guidance for integrating character education throughout the curriculum. Their resources encourage key values such as empathy, responsibility, perseverance, and integrity. These programs help schools cultivate positive school cultures that support social-emotional learning alongside academic achievement. While bullying prevention is included, the

emphasis is on fostering emotional well-being, social connection, and inclusivity so that all students feel valued and supported (StopBullying.gov, 2024).
Together, these platforms give schools a foundation for promoting the holistic well-being of students. By using these tools, educators can transform classrooms into spaces where mental health, emotional regulation, and character development are prioritized. Students gain skills to build resilience, maintain positive relationships, and thrive academically and personally. Access to these resources also allows schools to shift from reactive interventions to proactive, systemic approaches that address the root causes of stress and trauma, fostering long-term positive outcomes for all students.

Reflection and Next Steps

In the classroom, educators can begin by establishing clear, predictable routines that reduce anxiety and lighten cognitive load for students. Consistency through posted agendas, regular schedules, and clear instructions creates a stable learning environment where students feel secure and can focus on engaging with content rather than managing uncertainty (Avery et al., 2020). Integrating character education into daily lessons promotes social and emotional growth by teaching values such as empathy, respect, and perseverance. These traits help students navigate interpersonal challenges and persist through difficulties, fostering a positive school culture where every student feels recognized and supported (Character.org, 2023; Aminah, 2024). Examples include sharing stories that highlight acts of kindness, facilitating discussions that encourage respectful communication, or designing projects that celebrate resilience and effort.

Incorporating mindfulness and self-regulation strategies also plays a crucial role in trauma-sensitive classrooms. Calm corners equipped with sensory tools such as stress balls or weighted lap pads provide students a safe space when they feel overwhelmed. Breathing exercises and daily emotion check-ins help students identify and manage stress before it escalates, supporting emotional regulation and improving attention and engagement throughout the school day (University of Washington, 2021). When conflicts arise, restorative justice circles offer a structured and empathetic space for students to express their feelings, take responsibility, and collaboratively repair harm. This approach shifts disciplinary responses from punishment to relationship building and accountability, creating a more compassionate and supportive school environment (Aspen Institute, 2019).
Beyond the classroom, partnerships with families, mental health professionals, and community organizations are vital for creating a comprehensive support network around students. Regular family engagement and connections to counseling or social services strengthen the safety net for vulnerable youth and ensure that school-based efforts align with broader supports for student well-being (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2021).
School-wide programs that address social-emotional learning and incorporate character education values can also support mental health and reduce negative peer interactions. Emphasizing respect, kindness, and advocacy equips students to act positively and fosters an inclusive environment where all students feel valued. These initiatives contribute to safer and more welcoming schools where students have the opportunity to thrive both academically and emotionally (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2023; StopBullying.gov, 2024).

School leaders and educators should consider the following questions to strengthen student mental well-being efforts:

1. How are trauma-informed principles applied in daily school routines, staff training, and approaches to student behavior to support emotional safety?
2. In what ways is character education explicitly taught and reinforced to promote social-emotional development across the school?
3. How does the school climate actively foster belonging, emotional safety, and respect for the diverse mental health needs of students?
4. What systems are in place to identify students experiencing trauma, stress, anxiety, or depression early, and how are supports coordinated with families and mental health professionals?
5. How do staff model and encourage character strengths such as empathy, resilience, and perseverance to promote students' mental well-being?
6. Are students provided with meaningful roles and responsibilities that build self-esteem, agency, and confidence in their abilities?
7. In addition, to reflect specifically on the role of character education in supporting mental health:
8. How are character strengths explicitly connected to students' emotional regulation, coping strategies, and overall mental well-being in academic and extracurricular settings?
9. What opportunities exist for students to practice and reflect on traits such as responsibility, respect, and resilience in ways that support their mental health throughout the school day?
10. How does character education contribute to positive peer relationships and foster social inclusion while addressing conflict or harmful behaviors?
11. In what ways are students guided to set personal goals related to their character development and emotional well-being?
12. How does character education equip students with skills to manage stress, anxiety, and emotional challenges effectively?

By addressing these questions, schools can create supportive and nurturing environments where all students develop the emotional tools, coping strategies, and character strengths needed to thrive both academically and personally.

Activity K-2: "Emotion Charades Circle"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Help students recognize emotions in themselves and others through movement and expression.	Respect, Empathy, Self-Control	Builds a safe group setting for peer connection and expressive play, reducing shame and isolation.	Grades K–2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Social Awareness, Self-Management American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA: B-SS 2, B-SS 4	Participation, peer recognition of emotions, reflection share-out	Create Emotion cards (happy, sad, scared, angry, excited, confused)	Group Counseling (4–6 students)

Steps:

1. Begin with a calm breathing circle.
   - Introduce emotion charades – each student picks a card and acts out the emotion.
   - Group guesses and discusses how that emotion might feel, and what might help in handling the emotion or situation moving forward.

2. Identifying the Emotion
   - What emotion do you think they were showing?
   - How did you know? (What did their face, body, or voice tell you?)
   - Does anyone have a different guess?

3. Exploring How It Feels
   - When you feel [emotion], what does your body feel like inside?
   - Where do you feel it most — in your tummy, heart, head, hands?
   - Is this a big feeling or a small feeling?

4. Situations That Bring It Up
   - What kinds of things might make someone feel this way?
   - Can you think of a time when you felt [emotion]?
   - Do people always feel [emotion] for the same reasons, or can it be different?

5. Coping & Handling the Emotion
   - What could help someone feel better when they feel [emotion]?
   - If your friend felt this way, what could you say or do to help?
   - What's something you've tried before when you had this feeling? Did it help?
   - Is this an emotion you might want to share with a grown-up or keep private?

6. Moving Forward
   - If this feeling comes back, what's one tool you could use from your toolbox?
   - How do you know when the feeling has started to get smaller or gone away?

7. Debrief: What emotion was easiest/hardest? When do you feel ___?
   - Easiest / Hardest Emotions
   - Which emotion was easiest for you to act out? Why?
   - Which one was tricky or hard to act? What made it hard?

- Did acting it out feel silly, fun, or uncomfortable?

8. Connecting to Situations
   - Can you remember a time you felt [emotion]? What happened?
   - What kinds of things usually make kids feel [emotion]?
   - Do you think other people feel the same emotion in the same situation, or could it be different?

9. Building Awareness & Empathy
   - How can you tell when a friend feels [emotion]?
   - What can you do to help someone when they feel [sad/scared/angry]?
   - What do you like others to do for you when you feel [sad/scared/angry]?

10. Coping & Regulation
   - When you feel [angry/tired/worried], what helps you calm down?
   - When you feel [happy/excited/proud], how do you like to share that feeling?
   - If you don't know what emotion you're feeling, what could you do to figure it out?

Closing:

Create your own emotion cards to take home.

Handouts:

Emotion Charades

Activity K-2: "Let's Go for a Color Walk! "

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will practice mindfulness by going for a color walk.	Self-awareness, empowerment	The teacher will create predictability and structure within the activity. The teacher will normalize different body states and provide opportunities for student choice.	Grades K–2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competencies Self Awareness Self Management	Teacher observation of student participation during whole-class discussion and color walk. Student Deliverable: Color Hunt Handout	Color Hunt Handout (one for every student) Clipboards/something hard to write on for each student Pencils, colored pencils, crayons	Group

Steps:

1. Let's do a self-check-in before we go on an outside adventure today (model as needed).
   - If you're feeling calm in your body, give me a big smile!
   - If you're feeling wiggly and buzzy in your body, shake your shoulders back and forth!
   - If you're feeling slow and sleepy in your body, close your eyes and give me your loudest snore!

2. Make an observation out loud about their many body states.

- Teacher Script:
"Wow! We are feeling all sorts of ways in our class! Today, I want to teach you how to use mindfulness to calm your body.To be mindful means to be very present, thinking only of the very moment you're in! You aren't thinking of what you had for lunch, when you'll go home, or that you forgot your homework - you are only thinking about exactly what you are doing RIGHT NOW. One way to practice mindfulness is to go on a color walk! Today, we are going to slowly and mindfully walk around the playground BUT we have a goal. We are going to be SO mindful and present that we are looking for certain colors on our walk!

- Provide each student with their color hunt worksheet, something to write with, and a hard surface to draw on. Echo read the instructions out loud.

- Begin your color walk, and set a timer if needed. Encourage students to walk slowly, mindfully, and draw detailed pictures. Remind students the goal is to be PRESENT, not fast or rushed, that there is no pressure to find all the colors, and they are not to play on the equipment during the color walk. They get to choose where they go on the playground.

Closing:

When the color walk is over, invite the students back to the classroom. Have them bring their color hunt handouts to the floor as a group. Before having them share out loud, do another self-check-in. Let's see how we are feeling after our color walk:
   - If you're feeling calm in your body, give me a big smile!
   - If you're feeling wiggly and buzzy in your body, shake your shoulders back and forth!
   - If you're feeling slow and sleepy in your body, close your eyes and give me your loudest snore!

Make observations about any changes in body states. If time permits, students can work on coloring their drawings from the color walk or finding the remaining colors in the classroom.

Handouts:

Color Hunt Handout (one for every student)

Activity K-2: "Mood Monsters Match-Up"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Help students identify, name, and connect basic emotions to body cues and healthy coping strategies.	Self-Awareness, Honesty, Self-Control	Encourages body-emotion awareness in a safe 1:1 space; validates physical signs of distress and empowers coping through play.	Grades K–2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Self-Awareness, Self-Management American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA Mindsets & Behaviors: B-SMS 2, B-SMS 7, B-SS 1	Student identifies and matches at least 3 moods correctly Participates in coping skill role play or drawing Counselor observation of emotion vocabulary and regulation cues	Create your own Printable Mood Monsters cards (emotion characters) Coping Cards (e.g., breathing, talking to a friend, squeeze ball) "My Monster Mood Map" worksheet (see below) Crayons or markers	Individual Counseling

Steps:

1. Warm-Up Check-In:
   Use a simple emotion check-in (e.g., "Point to how you're feeling today"). Show 4–6 Mood Monsters.

2. Mood Monster Match-Up Game:
   Present Mood Monsters one at a time (happy, sad, mad, scared, tired, excited). For each:
   - Student names the feeling
   - Matches it to body clues (e.g., "When I'm mad, my fists feel tight")
   - Matches it to a coping card (e.g., deep breaths, talk to someone)

3. My Monster Mood Map:
   Student chooses 2 monsters they feel most often and draws or colors them on their worksheet, adding what helps them when they feel that way.

4. Practice Coping Skill:
   Try a chosen coping strategy together (e.g., belly breathing, stretch, shake it out).

Closing:

Give student their "Monster Mood Map" to take home and share with a trusted adult. Option to create a "calm down corner" version with favorite strategies.

Handouts:

"My Monster Mood Map"
Coping Cards

Activity 3-5: "Mood Meter Map"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Build emotional regulation by tracking intensity of feelings and learning calming strategies.	Self-awareness, Responsibility, Perseverance	Supports emotional labeling, co-regulation, and resilience building.	Grades 3-5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Self-Management American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA: B-SMS 7, M 2	Reflection on Mood Meter map, coping strategy discussion	Mood Meter (color zones) Strategy cards	Individual Counseling

Steps:

1. Introduce the Mood Meter with 4 zones (high energy/unpleasant, high energy/pleasant, low energy/unpleasant, low energy/pleasant).
   - Explain the 4 Zones:
     Red Zone: High energy/unpleasant (e.g., angry, frustrated, anxious)
     Yellow Zone: High energy/pleasant (e.g., excited, proud, energetic)
     Blue Zone: Low energy/unpleasant (e.g., sad, tired, lonely)
     Green Zone: Low energy/pleasant (e.g., calm, content, relaxed)
   - Facilitation Prompt Examples:
     "Sometimes we feel like we have a lot of energy but not always in a good way, can you think of a time you felt that way?"
     "Have you ever felt calm and peaceful? Which zone do you think that would be?"

2. Students place feelings on the meter and discuss situations.
   - The student identifies their current emotion(s) and "places" them in the correct zone on the Mood Meter. (This part of the activity is building self-awareness, which you might discuss if appropriate.)

   - How to do it:
     * You can provide a worksheet with the 4 zones (visual with space for feelings).
     * The student can write or draw feelings in each zone.
     * For each feeling, the student can describe a situation where they've felt that way.

   - Facilitation Prompt Examples:
     * "Where would you put the feeling of 'frustrated' on the Mood Meter?"
     * "Can you think of a recent time you felt proud or excited? Which zone is that in?"
     * "Sometimes we feel more than one emotion at once. Do any of these feelings happen together for you?"

Objective: Teach the student coping strategies matched to energy and pleasantness levels. (This portion is building perseverance and responsibility, which you might discuss if appropriate.)

Examples of Strategies:
- Red Zone (High Energy/Unpleasant): Jumping jacks, deep breaths, stretching, squeezing a stress ball, taking a short walk
- Yellow Zone (High Energy/Pleasant): Channel excitement into drawing, storytelling, or sharing positive news
- Blue Zone (Low Energy/Unpleasant): Journaling, listening to calming music, coloring, talking to a trusted adult, guided imagery
- Green Zone (Low Energy/Pleasant): Mindful breathing, reading, gratitude reflection, quiet focus activity

- Facilitation Prompt Examples:

"If you notice you're feeling frustrated (Red Zone), what's something you could do to help yourself feel calmer?"
"When you feel sad (Blue Zone), what has helped you before?"
"What can you do when you're calm and content (Green Zone) to keep that feeling?"

3. Practice 1–2 strategies together.
   - Match strategies to each zone (e.g., jumping jacks for red, journaling for blue).
   - Objective: Give the student hands-on experience using strategies.
   - How to do it:
     * Ask the student which zone they are in right now.
     * Select 1–2 strategies for that zone.
     * Guide the student through the strategy step-by-step.
   - Examples of Practice:
     * Red Zone: Lead the student in 10 jumping jacks or 5 deep belly breaths together.
     * Blue Zone: Spend 5 minutes journaling feelings or doing a guided visualization.
     * Green Zone: Practice a mindful breathing exercise together to reinforce calm.
     * Yellow Zone: Encourage the student to draw or verbally share something they are excited about.
   - Facilitation Prompt Examples:
     * "Let's try doing 5 deep breaths together. Notice how your body feels."
     * "Let's spend a couple of minutes drawing how you feel. What colors would you use?"
     * "After doing this strategy, where would you place your feeling on the Mood Meter now?"

Closing:

Students take home a mini mood meter to track for the week.

Handouts:

"Mood Meter"
Mini Mood Meter Tracker

Activity 3-5: "My Mental Health Toolbox"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Help students recognize and share tools that support mental wellness.	Courage, Compassion, Self-Reliance	Normalizes mental health conversation and builds safe peer dialogue.	Grades 3-5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Responsible Decision-Making American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA: B-SMS 10, B-SS 3	Completed Toolbox worksheet, verbal sharing	Paper "toolbox" template markers	Group (4–6 students)

Steps:

1. Start with a mental health myth/fact game. (Under handouts)
   - Discuss: What are healthy ways to care for your brain and heart?
   - Examples you can share with students:
     * Physical Care: Getting enough sleep, eating nutritious foods, exercising, drinking water.
     * Emotional Care: Talking about feelings, journaling, drawing, deep breathing, mindfulness.
     * Social Care: Spending time with friends/family, asking for help when needed, showing kindness.
     * Cognitive Care: Reading, solving puzzles, learning new skills, practicing focus and attention.
     * Fun & Relaxation: Listening to music, spending time in nature, playing games, creative hobbies.

2. Prompts and Questions to Encourage Student Reflection
   - "What is something you do that makes you feel calm and happy?"
   - "When you feel stressed, what helps your brain feel better?"
   - "Who can you talk to if your heart feels heavy or sad?"
   - "What is one activity that helps you think clearly or feel peaceful?"
   - "How do you take care of yourself when you feel excited, nervous, or worried?"
   - "Can you think of a time you helped a friend feel better? How did it make your heart feel?"
   - "If your brain had a favorite activity, what would it be?"
   - Tip: Encourage students to share multiple answers—they often have creative or surprising ideas!

3. Books and Videos to Share/Read-Aloud Books
   - "Your Fantastic Elastic Brain" by JoAnn Deak – teaches kids about brain growth and coping skills.
   - "The Way I Feel" by Janan Cain – explores emotions and recognizing feelings.
   - "Listening to My Body" by Gabi Garcia – connects body signals with emotions and coping.
   - "Have You Filled a Bucket Today?" by Carol McCloud – emphasizes social-emotional awareness and kindness.

4. Videos
   - Sesame Street: "When Sadness Comes" – short clip showing healthy coping.
   - Cosmic Kids Yoga (YouTube) – fun yoga and mindfulness for kids.
   - GoNoodle: "Mood Boosters" – movement breaks that encourage physical and emotional regulation.
   - BrainPOP Jr. Social-Emotional Videos – e.g., feelings, mindfulness, stress management.

5. Dialogue Facilitation Tips
   - After the read-aloud or video, ask students to share ideas for their toolbox: "Which strategies from the story or video can you try this week?"
   - Use a visual chart or "toolbox" template to record student ideas.
   - Encourage students to pick 1–2 strategies they will try each day and reflect at the end of the week.

6. Explain to students that these strategies help them show compassion for themselves, which is important for their well-being. They can demonstrate self-reliance and courage when choosing how to care for themselves. You may engage in discussion as to why this is important for their mental health and well-being. You may also discuss an example of these virtues from the video or read aloud if applicable.

7. Each student designs their own "toolbox" with at least 5 coping tools (drawing, music, pets, etc.)

8. Share 1–2 tools with the group. (from the list of Coping Tools below that can be added to "My Mental Health Toolbox.".

Closing:

Add one new tool to the box next week.

Handouts:

"My Mental Health Toolbox"
Mental Health Myths and Facts
List of Mental Health Coping Tools

Activity 6-8: "Inside Out Discussion Circles"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Develop social awareness and empathy by exploring shared experiences and emotional needs.	Empathy, Respect, Confidence	Builds connection, reduces shame, and encourages storytelling in a trusting circle.	Grades 6-8
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Social Awareness American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA: B-SS 4, B-SS 5	Participation, empathy observation, group reflection	Prompt cards Talking object (e.g., stone)	Group (6-8 students)

Steps:

Create a respectful circle space. This may include discussing norms such as respect for others, showing empathy with hand signals, active listening, courage in sharing, honest reflections, confidence in oneself, confidentiality in sharing, etc.)

- Explain the purpose of the circle in sharing our inner selves and fostering connection for well-being.
- Use prompt cards with statements to start the conversation: "A time I felt left out…", "Something I'm proud of…", "A big feeling I don't talk about…"
- One student shares at a time using the talking object.
- The group reflects using sentence stems: "I connect with that…" or "That made me think…"

Closing:

The group creates a shared mural or quote wall on "What Mental Health Means to Me."

Handouts:

"Prompt Cards"
Respectful Circle Space

Activity 6-8: "The Thought Spiral"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Teach students to recognize negative thought patterns and challenge them with realistic reframing.	Resilience, Integrity, Optimism	Supports emotional processing and self-talk restructuring in a safe, validating space.	Grades 6-8
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Self-Awareness, Responsible Decision-Making American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA: B-SMS 6, B-SMS 9	Completed spiral worksheet, ability to reframe at least one thought	Thought Spiral worksheet	Individual

Steps:

1. Discuss how thoughts affect feelings and behaviors.
    - Reflective Questions
        - "What were you thinking right before you felt upset or frustrated today?"
        - "Can you think of a time when a positive thought helped you feel better?"
        - "How did your thoughts affect what you did in that situation?"
        - "Have you ever believed something about yourself that wasn't true? How did it make you feel?"
    - Scenario-Based Prompts
        - "Imagine you have a big test tomorrow and you think, 'I'm going to fail.' How might that thought affect your feelings and actions?"
        - "If a friend ignores you and you think, 'They don't like me,' how could that thought influence what you do next?"
        - "You see a social media post that makes you feel bad about yourself. What are the thoughts you might have, and how might they affect your feelings and behaviors?"

2. Map a recent spiral: what started the thought, what feelings followed, what actions resulted.
    - Practice reframing one or two negative thoughts. For example: You may have a discussion about how reframing builds confidence, supports well-being, fosters resilience and optimism. You may also discuss what these words mean by sharing a definition and asking the students to share their opinions or experiences with how their thoughts affect their development of these virtues.

3. End with an affirmation card creation.

Closing:

Students create a positive "thought playlist" to use in tough moments.

Handouts:

"Thought Spiral Worksheet"
Affirmation Card Activity

Activity 9-12: "Exploring My Protective Factors"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will reflect and rate themselves on each of their current protective factors. Students will reflect on ways to increase protective factors and improve their overall mental well-being.	Compassion (for self and others), Introspective, Resilience, empathy	Predictable, safe, and structured group discussion. Parameters provided by the teacher to protect vulnerable self-disclosures.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competencies Self Awareness Self Management	Teacher observation of student discussion. Student Deliverable: Completed Protective Factors Worksheet	Printed worksheet for each student	Group and Whole Class

Steps:

1. The teacher will read the objective aloud with the students before beginning the class discussion.

2. Explain that recalling things we have experienced and ways to protect ourselves not only shows compassion (for self and others), but it also builds our introspection and resilience. The more we are self-aware and able to protect ourselves, the better our mental wellbeing will be.

3. DISCUSSION (Whole Group or Small Groups)

    - Reflect on a difficult time in your life. During that time, who and what supported you through this? How might this time of your life be different without these supports? (Remind students that in discussion they do not need to share vulnerable self disclosure, unless they wish to)
    - Self-Reflection and Independent Work: Provide students with the handout about Protective Factors. Read the instructions and information on protective factors before encouraging students to work on the worksheet on their own.
    - Have students complete their worksheet independently.

Closing:

Have students discuss their answers in a whole-group or small-group setting. Remind students about safety in sharing, permission to omit or take a listening role if personal disclosures feel too vulnerable in a peer setting.

Handouts:

Protective Factors (one for each student).

Activity 9-12: "Mental Health Map"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Help students create a personal action plan to maintain mental health and access support.	Self-Advocacy, Responsibility, Integrity	Empowers agency, fosters trust and self-ownership in healing.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Responsible Decision-Making American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA: M 3, B-SMS 10	Completed map, student can identify 3 supports/resources	Mental Health Action Plan worksheet	Individual Counseling

Steps:

1. Explore student's current stressors and supports.
   - -Goal: Understand what challenges and helps the student.
   - - Prompts: "What's stressing you right now?" / "Who or what helps you feel better?"
   - - Examples: Exams, family conflict / friends, music, exercise

2. Map out 4 domains: body, mind, relationships, environment.
   - - Prompts & Examples:
     - Body: sleep, energy - exercise, stretching
     - Mind: thoughts, emotions - journaling, mindfulness
     - Relationships: friends, family - talking to trusted adult
     - Environment: home, school - quiet spaces, routines
   - - Add supports and warning signs for each.
     - Goal: Recognize coping strategies and early stress signs
     - Prompts: "What helps?" / "How do you know you're struggling?"

3. Create an "In Crisis" plan.
   - - Goal: Develop steps for overwhelming stress or unsafe feelings, helping students to become self-aware and an advocate for themselves. Explain to students knowing what to do to help themselves, knowing who to ask for help, and knowing when to ask for help builds self-awareness, responsibility, self-advocacy and compassion for oneself but also requires courage. Support the student with affirmations and encouragement in being able to foster these strengths through recognition and practice.
   - - Prompts: "Who can you contact?" / "What helps calm you down?"
   - - Examples: Call parent, counselor, crisis line; take a walk; grounding technique

Closing:

Students keep a digital or printed version in their binder or phone.

Handouts:

"My Mental Health Map".

Activity 9-12: "My Mental Health Toolbox"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
To help students identify and practice healthy coping strategies they can use when life feels overwhelming, stressful, or uncertain.	Self-awareness, courage, resilience, empathy, integrity, hope, self-respect	Empowerment: Students create their own support system. Choice & Voice: Students choose tools that feel authentic to them. Safety: Focuses on skill-building, not personal disclosure. Hope & Resilience: Reinforces that coping strategies can help them thrive, not just survive.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 2: Self-Management CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills	Reflective Check-In and Self-Evaluation Purpose: To measure students' understanding of mental health concepts, coping strategies, and self-awareness in a supportive, non-graded way that values reflection over disclosure. Reflection Prompts (Written or Digital Journal). After completing their toolbox, students respond to 3–4 prompts such as: "Name one new strategy or coping tool you added to your toolbox and why you chose it." "How can using these tools help you stay balanced when life feels stressful?" "Which personal trait (like courage, resilience, or self-awareness) will you use to take care of your mental health?" "What is one small action you can take this week to support your mental wellness?" Students can respond privately (journal or digital form) to respect confidentiality. Self-Evaluation Checklist. Students complete a short checklist rating themselves (1–5 scale or emojis) on: I can name at least two tools that support my mental health. I can identify signs when I need to use a coping tool. I understand that it's okay to ask for help. I can describe one personal strength that helps me manage stress. (Teacher reviews for comprehension and growth mindset, not personal disclosure.) Optional Creative Assessment (Visual or Verbal). Students who prefer a non-written option may: Present their toolbox visually (poster, slide, drawing) highlighting 3–5 tools. Or record a short voice/video reflection using a prompt like, "One thing I learned about taking care of my mental health is..."	Circle of chairs Talking piece/object Chart paper or white board Markers Sticky notes Journals	Small group/whole class

Steps:

1. Re-Ground & Reflect (5 minutes).
    - Begin with a short centering exercise to set a calm tone: "Close your eyes or look down softly. Take one slow breath in... and out. Think about one thing from your Balance Tree (activity found in this book) that helps you feel steady."
    - Then ask: "What helps you calm down or feel safe when things are stressful?" "Who or what supports your mental wellness?"
    - Have students jot a few quick responses.

2. Introduce the Toolbox Concept (5 minutes).
    - The teacher says: "Just like we use a toolbox to fix or build things, we can create a 'mental health toolbox' filled with tools that help us manage emotions, stress, and challenges. Everyone's toolbox looks different — what works for one person might not work for another." This demonstrates empathy for students.
    - Give examples of healthy coping "tools": Taking a walk or spending time outdoors. Talking to a trusted adult or friend. Practicing mindfulness or prayer. Listening to music or journaling. Setting boundaries or saying "no." Doing something creative or physical.
    - Remind students that knowing themselves and their needs builds self-awareness and allows them to recognize how to show self-respect and compassion for themselves.

3. Create the Toolbox (15 minutes).
    - Students design their own "Mental Health Toolbox" on paper, digitally, or as a small collage. They divide it into four compartments:
        * Mind Tools: "What helps me think clearly?" (Examples: breathing exercises, affirmations, positive self-talk).
        * Body Tools: "What helps me release stress physically?" (Examples include stretching, yoga, dancing, sports).
        * Heart Tools: "What helps me feel cared for or connected?" (Examples include talking to a friend, petting a pet, volunteering, joining a club).
        * Support Tools: "Who can I reach out to when I need help?" (Examples include teacher, parent, counselor, hotline, mentor).

4. Group Share or Gallery Walk (5 minutes, optional).
    - Students can share one non-personal tool or idea that others might add to their toolboxes.
    - Examples: "I put 'taking deep breaths' in mine," or "Music helps me reset."
    - The teacher reinforces that everyone's coping tools are unique and valuable.
    - Thank them for their courage in sharing and support for one another.

Closing:

Reflection & Assessment (5 minutes).
- Students complete a short reflection (written or verbal): "Which tool will you try next time you feel stressed?" "How can these tools help you care for your mental health?"
- Assessment Focus: Identifies at least two healthy coping tools. Demonstrates understanding that mental health requires ongoing care. Engage respectfully and thoughtfully.

Activity 9-12: "Stigma Smash"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Address mental health stigma and build allyship within peer groups.	Courage, Respect, Social Responsibility	Encourages truth-telling and safe exploration of harmful beliefs.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Social Awareness, Responsible Decision-Making American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA: B-SS 7, B-SS 9	Student statements, discussion depth, post-activity reflection	Stigma statements (printed) "Smash It" wall or box	Group

Steps:

1. Begin with anonymous submissions of harmful stereotypes heard about mental health.
    Examples Students Might Submit:
        * "People with depression are just lazy."
        * "If you see a therapist, it means you're weak."
        * "Anxiety is not a real problem, it's just overthinking."
        * "Mental illness is something to be embarrassed about."

2. Print (Stigma Statements) or write these on paper "bricks" to symbolize barriers.
    - Read aloud examples from the 'Stigma Statements'.
    - Discuss how these may be stigmas and what that means. Explain we can have the courage to break stigmas through our words, actions, and empathy or compassion for others.
    - Discuss a social responsibility in doing so and why that matters for a better society.
    - Smash the bricks (tear, crumple, or shred) as a group as a symbolization of having the courage to break the stigmas.
    - Replace with truth statements or facts about mental wellness (you may wish to brainstorm these ahead of time depending on your students).
    - As students destroy the bricks, invite them to replace them with:
        * Truth statements
        * Mental health facts
        * Positive affirmations
        * Lived experiences or examples of support

Closing:

Create posters or digital stories to educate the school community.

Handouts:

"Stigma Statements"
Stigma Smash - Truth Replacement Examples

Activity 9-12: "The Balance Tree: Understanding My Mental Health and Wellness"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
To help students explore what mental health means, identify supports that help maintain balance, and recognize healthy coping strategies while learning that everyone experiences mental health challenges at times.	Self-awareness, courage, resilience, empathy, integrity, hope	Safety: Clear boundaries; no disclosure required. Empowerment: Focuses on strengths and agency. Choice: Students control what they share. Connection: Encourages peer empathy and understanding. Trust & Transparency: Normalizes discussion of mental health as part of overall well-being.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 2: Self-Management CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills	Teacher Observation: 1. Engagement in the activity. 2. Ability to identify supports or coping tools. 3. Understanding of mental health concepts. Student Reflection Indicators: 4. Demonstrates insight into mental wellness (self-awareness, coping, or empathy). 5. Can name at least one personal strength or strategy for maintaining balance.	Circle of chairs Talking piece/object Chart paper or white board Markers Sticky notes Journals	Small group/whole class

Steps:

1. Grounding & Psychological Safety (5 minutes)
   - Begin with a brief mindfulness or sensory grounding activity: "Take a slow breath in and notice your feet on the floor. Exhale slowly and picture a calm, steady place in your mind."
   - Review norms. For example: We respect privacy and no one has to share personal stories. Everyone's voice matters; listening is an act of kindness. It's okay to pass. Mental health is part of being human — just like physical health.

2. Opening Discussion: Understanding Mental Health (5–7 minutes)
   - Ask: "When you hear the words mental health, what comes to mind?" "How is mental health different from mental illness?"
   - Clarify key points: Mental health = our emotional, psychological, and social well-being and everyone has it.
   - Mental illness = when challenges like depression, anxiety, or trauma interfere with daily life. It's not a character flaw, and help is available.
   - Normalize that seeking help shows strength, courage, and self-awareness.

3. Character Trait Focus: Building Wellness from Within (7 minutes). Introduce six wellness traits and connect them to mental health.
   - Self-awareness: Recognizing feelings and needs.
   - Courage: Asking for help or setting boundaries.
   - Resilience: Recovering after tough experiences.
   - Empathy: Supporting others without judgment.
   - Integrity: Being honest about how you're doing.
   - Hope: Believing healing is possible.

   Prompt:
   "Which of these traits do you rely on when life feels stressful? Which one do you want to grow stronger in?" Students jot one or two traits in their notebooks.

4. Main Activity: Create Your 'Balance Tree' (15–20 minutes)
   Students draw or use a provided outline of a tree. Each part represents an element of mental wellness.
   - Roots: What grounds you and supports you? (Some examples might be faith, family, routines, nature).
   - Trunk: What traits keep you strong? (Some examples might be courage, integrity, perseverance).
   - Branches: What helps you reach for growth and balance? (Some examples include therapy, exercise, music, art, talking to a friend).
   - Leaves/fruit: What positive outcomes or hopes do you have? (Some examples could be peace, success, joy).

5. Optional Sharing Circle (5–7 minutes)
   - Invite volunteers to share one part of their tree.
   - Prompts:
   "What helps you stay balanced when things feel heavy?" "Which wellness trait helps you most right now?"
   - Teacher affirmations: "Mental health is something we all work on. Your tree shows that you have tools, supports, and strengths to help you grow."

Closing:

Optional Extension: Reflection or Exit Ticket (5 minutes).
Students respond (verbally or written) to one of the following:
"What's one new thing you learned about mental health today?" "What helps you feel balanced or calm?" "Which wellness trait will you try to strengthen this week?"

Peer Conflicts

Peer conflict is a typical part of development, as children and adolescents learn to build relationships, resolve disagreements, and navigate social hierarchies. However, when these conflicts are left unresolved or poorly managed, they can escalate into emotionally damaging experiences that may result in trauma. Such trauma can undermine a student's sense of safety, interfere with academic performance, and impair social-emotional development. National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) (n.d.-a) notes that trauma can affect how students behave, make it harder for them to focus in class, and interfere with their ability to build healthy relationships with others, especially when related to experiences like bullying or peer aggression. Bullying has a huge impact on students' mental health, often leading to anxiety, depression, and other emotional struggles (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services & StopBullying.gov, 2025). National data show that teens who experience bullying are almost twice as likely to report symptoms of anxiety (29.8% compared to 14.5%) or depression (28.5% compared to 12.1%) within a two-week period compared to their peers who have not been bullied (Haile, Arockiaraj, Zablotsky, & Ng, 2024).

VS Case Study - Peer Conflicts:

A fifth-grade student frequently clashed with classmates, leading to ongoing peer conflicts and disruptions during group projects. Victory teachers identified that the root issue stemmed from difficulty showing respect toward differing opinions. The school's character program focused on teaching respect, both in words and actions. Through role-playing, restorative conversations, and consistent feedback, the student learned how to listen without interrupting and value the perspectives of others. As respect became a daily practice, conflicts decreased and group work became smoother. Teachers recognized the student's improved ability to navigate disagreements with maturity. By the end of the year, the student demonstrated growth as a positive peer leader, respected by classmates and trusted by staff.

Students who experience bullying often begin to feel isolated and may gradually withdraw from friendships, extracurricular activities, and even their academic responsibilities. The ongoing stress caused by peer conflict can make it increasingly difficult for them to concentrate, feel secure, and remain engaged in the learning process. Without appropriate support and intervention, these challenges can escalate into long-term emotional difficulties, declining academic performance, and strained social relationships.
This connection highlights the importance of trauma-informed practices, as bullying is in many ways a form of trauma. Trauma can disrupt a student's ability to regulate emotions, process their environment, and build trusting relationships, all of which are essential for success in school. When educators and school staff fail to recognize and address the deeper impact of trauma resulting from bullying, it often manifests as withdrawal, disruptive behavior, or chronic absenteeism, further compounding the harm.

School leaders, school counselors, and educators have a vital role in recognizing early signs of trauma stemming from peer conflict and addressing them through trauma-informed approaches. This involves creating predictable and emotionally safe environments, teaching emotional regulation and conflict resolution skills, and ensuring students feel seen and supported. Trauma-informed systems recognize how common trauma is and work to prevent further harm by responding with empathy, providing consistent structure, and fostering meaningful connections (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014-b). Research also emphasizes that trauma-sensitive practices improve student engagement and emotional well-being (University of Washington, 2021). When trauma-informed strategies are integrated into school culture, they not only reduce conflict-related harm but also help students build resilience and relational skills essential for lifelong well-being (SAMHSA, 2014-b; University of Washington, 2021).

Causes of Trauma: Understanding Peer Conflict

Peer conflict, ranging from minor disagreements to bullying, is a common part of student development. While occasional conflicts help children and adolescents learn social navigation, persistent or intense peer problems can disrupt a student's sense of safety and belonging within school. These experiences may cause emotional trauma that negatively impacts well-being, academic engagement, and success.
Research by Zhao et al. (2024), involving over 95,000 students, revealed that those subjected to bullying were up to 18 times more likely to experience anxiety and PTSD symptoms than their non-bullied peers.

Such findings underscore the importance of educators understanding the emotional and relational dynamics underlying peer conflicts. As Zhao et al. (2024) state, "students who experienced bullying showed significantly higher risks of developing anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other psychological symptoms compared to those who were not bullied" (Conclusion and Discussion section, para. 2). Trauma-informed schools equipped to "recognize and respond to the impact of traumatic stress" can better support students' academic and emotional development (NCTSN, n.d.-b). Research by Bailey et al. (2019) emphasizes that trauma and similar adverse experiences can significantly disrupt students' ability to learn and thrive in school. They point out that "reactive and exclusionary discipline policies inhibit children's abilities to build and practice self-regulation skills and jeopardize the relationships between students and teachers," reinforcing the importance of trauma-sensitive approaches that prioritize consistency, support, and strong student-teacher connections to promote both emotional and academic growth.

SAMHSA (2014-a) recommends that schools and organizations take a trauma-informed approach by first understanding just how common trauma is and how deeply it can affect individuals. This means being able to recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma when they appear, responding in ways that support healing rather than causing further harm, and actively working to avoid re-traumatizing students. When school counselors and social workers embrace these principles, they're not only better equipped to manage peer conflicts but can also turn those difficult moments into opportunities for students to grow, heal, and build stronger resilience and overall well-being.

Effects on Children

Social Impact: Disrupted Connections

Trauma from peer conflict can significantly hinder children's ability to form and maintain healthy relationships. Some students may withdraw socially, while others may show aggression or emotional dysregulation, behaviors often misunderstood as mere discipline problems but frequently rooted in deeper emotional wounds. The NCTSN (n.d.-c) emphasizes that trauma can disrupt trust, attachment, and social competence, especially when schools overlook the emotional distress behind behaviors (Core Concept 4, p. 3). Chronic peer conflict or bullying can also lead to long-term psychological challenges like anxiety, depression, and impaired peer functioning (StopBullying.gov, 2025). Studies show that when students experience trauma, they may begin to withdraw by avoiding both school and peer interactions, which can negatively impact their academic success and social development. This pattern of school avoidance is especially common among students who face bullying or feel unfairly treated, often putting the most vulnerable learners at greater risk of falling behind (Mental Health America, n.d.).

Trauma-informed schools are designed to prioritize safety, consistency, and strong, supportive relationships to help students recover from the adverse effects of trauma. By fostering inclusive and responsive environments, educators can shift the focus from punishment to understanding, using empathy and structure to address behavioral challenges. For example, if a student keeps disrupting class, instead of immediately giving them detention, a teacher might take time to understand what is really causing the behavior. The student could be acting out because of problems at home or feeling anxious about schoolwork. In an inclusive and responsive classroom, the teacher could meet with the student privately, listen with empathy, and work with them to find ways to manage their emotions, such as using calming strategies or taking a short, structured break. This approach still provides clear expectations and consistency but focuses on understanding and supporting the student rather than simply punishing them.
These approaches help restore trust and social connections, ultimately promoting both short-term healing and long-term academic and social success. Avery et al. (2020) explain that trauma-informed practices aim to "create safe and supportive learning environments ... enabling students to regulate their emotions, focus their attention, and succeed academically and socially" (p. 382). Similarly, guidance from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (2024) highlights that trauma-informed school strategies reduce mental health risks and build stronger, more resilient school communities. By fostering a culture of safety and emotional support, schools can create environments where all students feel empowered to learn, connect, and thrive.

Emotional Impact: Anxiety, Depression, and Self-Esteem

Students who experience peer conflict or bullying frequently face increased levels of anxiety, depression, and diminished self-esteem. These emotional challenges can significantly influence their self-perceptions and reduce their capacity for resilience. Research consistently demonstrates that low self-esteem among adolescents is strongly associated with heightened anxiety and depressive symptoms, which adversely affect academic performance and overall quality of life. For example, Zhong et al. (2021) identified bullying victimization as a significant risk factor for anxiety and depression, with self-esteem acting as a critical mediator in this relationship. Similarly, a systematic review by Tsaousis (2016) found that emotions such as shame, guilt, frustration, and fear experienced by victims contribute to lowered self-esteem, which subsequently predicts social anxiety and depressive symptoms. These findings emphasize the crucial need for interventions that address emotional well-being and foster self-esteem to mitigate the negative effects of peer victimization.

In response, educational settings must prioritize creating environments that support students' emotional health, promote positive self-regard, and build resilience. By doing so, schools can play a vital role in facilitating both psychological recovery and academic success.
Positive peer relationships boost self-esteem and reduce loneliness, whereas bullying or exclusion worsen feelings of hopelessness and withdrawal. Therefore, fostering supportive peer environments is crucial. SAMHSA's trauma-informed approach outlines principles like safety, trustworthiness, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural sensitivity to address emotional needs effectively (SAMHSA, 2014-a). Schools that promote empathy and support can help students rebuild self-esteem and develop healthy coping skills.

Cognitive Impact: Learning and Academic Performance

Experiencing conflict within peer groups can be deeply unsettling for students and often leads to trauma that affects more than just emotions. This kind of trauma can interfere with how the brain processes information, making it harder for students to pay attention, remember what they learn, and manage tasks effectively. According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN, n.d.-a), trauma disrupts critical brain functions essential for concentration and memory retention.
Integrating character education within the school curriculum not only supports students' emotional well-being but also helps them develop the moral and ethical foundation needed for lifelong success. While social-emotional learning (SEL) focuses on skills such as self-awareness, emotional regulation, and responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d.), character education goes a step further by intentionally fostering virtues like respect, integrity, empathy, and responsibility. These qualities shape students' sense of purpose and guide how they treat others, contributing to a more positive and respectful school culture.

Research has consistently shown that when students build both SEL skills and strong character traits, they are better equipped to make thoughtful choices, engage in healthy relationships, and contribute positively to their communities. A comprehensive meta-analysis by Durlak et al. (2011) found that SEL initiatives improve academic performance, attendance, and social skills, while trauma-informed approaches create safe, trusting environments that build resilience and promote healing (SAMHSA, 2014-b). When these strategies are paired with character education, the focus moves beyond simply managing emotions or behavior to nurturing deeper qualities like kindness, perseverance, and fairness.

By embedding character education alongside SEL principles into daily teaching, schools create an environment that nurtures both the heart and mind. Students not only learn how to manage their emotions and interact positively with peers but also develop a strong moral compass that prepares them to lead with empathy, contribute meaningfully to society, and uphold values that support the well-being of others.

Physical Impact: Neurological and Developmental Effects

Chronic peer conflict activates the body's stress response, releasing hormones like cortisol that, if prolonged, impair brain regions involved in emotional regulation and executive function, which are skills critical for learning and social interaction (Center on the Developing Child, 2024). For educators, school leaders, and counselors, understanding this process is vital because ongoing peer-related stress can significantly hinder a student's ability to focus, control impulses, and manage emotions effectively. These are capabilities essential for academic success and positive social engagement. When students face repeated bullying, exclusion, or unresolved peer tensions, their brains remain in a heightened state of stress, which can diminish their capacity to engage fully in classroom activities and build healthy relationships. Creating positive learning environments that foster safety, inclusion, and mutual respect is therefore essential not only to reduce these harmful stress responses but also to ensure that all students can develop the social and cognitive skills needed to thrive.

In addition to these cognitive effects, students often experience physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, and fatigue, which may lead to increased absenteeism or withdrawal from school participation (McInerney & McKlindon, 2014). These physical signs are often overlooked but should be recognized as potential indicators of deeper emotional distress. By recognizing the broad impact of peer conflict, school professionals can develop compassionate, trauma-informed strategies to support students, helping them stay connected to school, regulate their emotions, and succeed both academically and socially.

Understanding the effects of trauma and chronic stress on students is essential for school leaders, educators, and counselors. Trauma can significantly disrupt a student's ability to focus, regulate emotions, and engage in learning. In response, trauma-informed schools create predictable routines and structured, safe environments that help students feel supported and reduce anxiety, fostering a greater sense of stability (SAMHSA, 2014-a). These schools also prioritize access to counseling and health services, recognizing that addressing both emotional and physical health needs is crucial for promoting healing and building resilience. By implementing trauma-informed practices, educators not only support the well-being of individual students but also cultivate a positive school climate that enhances learning and academic achievement for all.

Personal Impact: Emotional and Social Effects

Children who experience ongoing peer conflict and trauma frequently encounter deep emotional struggles that impact both their overall well-being and how they see themselves. Research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2023) shows that students who face bullying and continuous peer difficulties are much more likely to suffer from anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation compared to their peers who are not bullied. These emotional challenges can gradually undermine their self-confidence and lead to lasting negative thoughts about themselves, which can make them more prone to withdrawing socially or, in some cases, acting out aggressively. Moreover, the CDC (2023) emphasizes that the mental health effects of bullying are not just short-term; they can persist into adulthood, highlighting why it is so crucial to provide support and intervention early on to help these students heal and build resilience.

Trauma can interfere with a child's ability to build trust and feel secure in their relationships. This disruption often leads to difficulties in managing emotions, causing instability and making it harder for the child to connect with peers and adults socially. For educators, school leaders, and counselors, understanding this process is vital because ongoing trauma can significantly hinder a student's ability to focus, control impulses, and manage emotions effectively. These are capabilities essential for academic success and positive social engagement.

More recent guidance from the National Child Traumatic Stress Network emphasizes that trauma-informed practices should be embedded within the entire school culture, integrating empathy, predictability, and nurturing relationships into policies and daily routines (NCTSN, 2021). Such supportive environments not only help students regulate their emotions but also build resilience, ultimately fostering healing and improving their ability to engage successfully both socially and academically.

Academic Impact: Learning and Performance Effects

The impact of trauma caused by peer conflict on students' academic performance is significant and far-reaching. According to the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2016), students who endure bullying or aggressive behavior from their peers frequently face challenges such as decreased academic success, missing more days of school, and a greater likelihood of leaving school before graduation. These negative outcomes reflect how the emotional and psychological effects of peer-related trauma can disrupt students' ability to focus, participate fully in class, and maintain consistent attendance, all of which are crucial for educational achievement.

For educators, counselors, and school leaders, understanding the profound influence of peer conflict trauma is essential for creating effective support systems. Recognizing that behavioral issues or academic struggles may stem from underlying trauma allows school staff to respond with empathy rather than punishment. By fostering trauma-informed environments- where predictable routines, safe spaces, and trusting relationships are prioritized- educators can help students regain a sense of security and stability. Counselors play a key role in providing targeted interventions and emotional support, helping students develop coping skills and resilience. Collectively, these efforts not only improve individual student outcomes but also contribute to a more positive and inclusive school climate where all students have the opportunity to thrive academically and socially (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014-a).

Implementing trauma-informed educational practices- including social-emotional learning (SEL) programs and restorative approaches- can counteract these effects by creating safe and supportive school climates that nurture students' cognitive and emotional capacities (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], n.d.). These approaches are essential for students who have experienced trauma, as they help restore a sense of safety, predictability, and connection, foundations that are often disrupted by adverse experiences. SEL programs equip students with important life skills such as emotional regulation, empathy, and responsible decision-making, while restorative practices foster healing and accountability through open dialogue and strengthened relationships. Similarly, character education reinforces these efforts by intentionally developing core virtues such as respect, integrity, and responsibility, which promote a positive school culture and support students' moral and social growth (Character.org, 2021).

For educators, counselors, and school leaders, embracing these strategies means rethinking traditional discipline and classroom management through a lens of empathy and understanding. Educators play a critical role in recognizing signs of trauma and responding in ways that build trust and stability. By creating consistent routines, modeling emotional awareness, and prioritizing relationship-building, school professionals can help students feel supported and empowered. These trauma-informed efforts not only improve individual student outcomes but also contribute to a healthier, more inclusive school climate where all students are positioned to thrive academically and emotionally.

Where to Get Additional Support

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) offers a variety of resources designed specifically to help educators understand and address trauma in school settings. Through comprehensive toolkits and training modules, NCTSN equips school staff with evidence-based strategies to implement trauma-informed practices. One notable resource, the *Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators*, provides practical guidance for recognizing trauma symptoms and responding to students' emotional and behavioral needs with care and sensitivity. These tools support schools in creating safe, supportive environments where students impacted by trauma can begin to heal and succeed (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2023).

Similarly, StopBullying.gov, an initiative of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, serves as a comprehensive platform offering guidance on bullying prevention, intervention, and student support. The website provides clear instructions on how educators can identify bullying, respond effectively, and assist students who have experienced bullying. It also features videos demonstrating conflict resolution and trauma-informed responses in real school situations, which helps educators apply practical strategies with greater confidence (StopBullying.gov, n.d.).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) promotes the integration of social-emotional learning (SEL) within trauma-informed education frameworks. CASEL offers research-based frameworks and case studies to guide schools in implementing SEL programs that foster students' emotional regulation, self-awareness, and relationship skills. This approach supports both academic achievement and the social-emotional development of trauma-affected students, enabling them to better manage peer conflict and build resilience (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning [CASEL], 2023).

In addition to these national resources, many local community mental health agencies and school counseling networks provide workshops, peer support groups, and crisis intervention services tailored to their communities. School leaders are encouraged to partner with these agencies to extend support beyond the classroom, ensuring students have access to comprehensive care. Such collaborations can enhance staff training opportunities, expand counseling resources, and provide a broader safety net for students facing trauma-related challenges (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2022).

Reflection and Next Steps

Use this space to reflect on your school's current approach to peer conflict, trauma-informed care, and character education:

- What trauma-informed strategies are currently in place, and where might there be gaps?
- How well are students' emotional and academic needs addressed after peer conflict incidents?
- What community resources or local organizations could your school partner with to support students better?
- What professional development opportunities could help your staff build skills in trauma-informed and attachment-based practices?
- Identify one or two immediate next steps your school can take to enhance its trauma-informed approach.Now consider how character education connects to these efforts:
- How does your school currently teach and reinforce core character values such as respect, integrity, empathy, and responsibility?
- In what ways are these values modeled and integrated into daily routines, classroom instruction, and schoolwide expectations?
- How might character education support students in resolving peer conflict in positive, constructive ways?
- What opportunities exist to connect character education with restorative practices and SEL to create a more cohesive, values-based school culture?
- What immediate steps could strengthen your school's commitment to character development alongside trauma-informed care?

Activity: K-2 "Face It, Name It, Tame It"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Help students identify and name emotions related to peer conflict. Begin to regulate emotional responses in safe, supported ways.	Self-awareness, honesty, emotional control	Supports emotional literacy to manage stress responses. Builds trust through consistent, supportive one-on-one interaction.	Grades K–2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SS 7: Demonstrate effective coping skills when faced with a problem Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Self-Awareness, Self-Management	The educator will note the student's ability to identify feelings accurately. Verbal or pictorial response: "What face matches your feeling today?"	Emotion face cards or charts Mirror (optional for facial expression practice)	Independent (One-on-One)

Steps:

1. Greet the student and introduce the activity.
   - Present emotion face cards and model identifying emotions.
   - Discuss what it means to be aware of your feelings and emotions and naming them can help us understand them, but it is important to be honest about it.
   - Ask the student to point to or name how they feel.
   - If able, the student uses a mirror to mimic the face.

2. Guide a brief discussion about a recent conflict and how that emotion was felt.

Closing:

Wrap up with a calming activity like deep breathing or a short story.
Extension: Send home a mini emotion chart for practice with caregivers.

Handouts:

Emotion Chart

Blank Face Template for drawing feelings

Activity K-2: "Pass the Kindness"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Encourage kind peer interactions and verbal expression of appreciation. Strengthen sense of belonging and cooperation.	Kindness, empathy, respect	Promotes connection and co-regulation through play. Builds relational safety and predictability.	Grades K–2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA M3, B-SS 2 Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Relationship Skills, Social Awareness	Observation checklist: eye contact, turn-taking, kind language. Prompt: "One kind thing I said today was…"	Soft ball or bean bag for passing Circle seating or floor space	Group Activity (4–8 students)

Steps:

1. Students sit in a circle.
   - Explain they will pass the ball and say something kind to the next person.
   - Explain it is important to respect one another and to show empathy.
   - Explain what these words mean and what they look like.

You may wish to model or role play these actions ahead of time:

Saying Something Kind
Definition:
Using words that make someone feel happy, cared for, or appreciated.

Example in a Sharing Circle:
"I like how you helped me clean up the crayons yesterday."
This shows kindness because the student is using words to make a classmate feel good and valued.

Respect One Another
Definition:
Treating others the way you want to be treated — by listening, waiting your turn, and using polite words.

Example in a Sharing Circle:
When someone is talking, everyone else looks at them and listens quietly until it's their turn to share.
This shows respect because students are giving full attention and not interrupting.

Show Empathy
Definition:
Understanding how someone else feels and showing care through your words or actions.

Example in a Sharing Circle:
A classmate says they miss their pet, and another student says, "I'm sorry you're sad. I miss my dog sometimes too."
This shows empathy because the student recognizes the other's feelings and offers comfort.

Model saying something kind with the sentence: "I like how you…" or "You're good at…"
Continue around the circle until all have participated.

Closing:

Debrief: "How did it feel to hear kind words?"
Extension: Make a kindness chain or wall with affirmations.

Handouts:

Printable Kindness Prompts or sentence starters.

Activity 3-5: "Conflict Detective"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Help students explore the root causes of a peer conflict. Teach reflective strategies for future conflict prevention	Responsibility, Integrity, Self-awareness	Encourages metacognition to reduce impulsive reactions. Builds emotional safety through individual support.	Grades 3-5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SMS 7: Demonstrate effective coping skills when faced with a problem Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Responsible Decision-Making, Self-Awareness	Students write or verbally identify steps they could take in the future. Educator reflection notes.	Conflict scenario worksheet Detective notebook (printable) Pencil	Independent (One-on-One)

Steps:

1. Introduce the role of a "conflict detective"- someone who investigates the conflict, causes and resolutions.
Share that a conflict detective is able to problem solve and take responsible actions to solve the issues by showing integrity and working to do the right thing. If they are involved, knowing what they did right and wrong builds their self-awareness and helps them improve for the future.

2. Have the student complete the short worksheet about a recent conflict.

3. As they act as a detective getting to the bottom of the issue, use the guided questions to uncover root causes and possible solutions.

4. Brainstorm 2–3 actions they can take next time. Encourage them to be self-aware and courageous as they act with integrity.

Closing:

Review and praise student insights.
Extension: Student teaches the detective strategy to a peer.

Handouts:

Conflict Detective Worksheet
Reflection Sheet

Activity 3-5: “Team Talk Toolbox”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Develop healthy peer communication strategies. Teach students to resolve conflict collaboratively.	Communication Teamwork Problem-solving	Fosters peer regulation and cooperative problem-solving. Encourages inclusive group dynamics.	Grades 3-5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SS 4: Demonstrate effective listening and collaboration skills Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Relationship Skills, Social Awareness	Peer and educator feedback checklist. Student-created group poster summarizing “Our Conflict Toolbox.”	Poster board Markers Conflict scenario cards Printable toolbox icons (e.g., listening, empathy, “I” statements)	Group (4–6 students)

Steps:

1. Introduce each tool in the communication toolbox.

2. Facilitate a discussion around the tools and how they helps students communicate their feelings. Share which tool is most helpful for each student and why. Encourage communication and openness. You may wish to start the discussion with team norms, such as respectful listening, empathy for one another, and courage in sharing.

3. In small groups, discuss a peer conflict scenario using the tools. Allow students to use tools to problem solve together, encouraging communication and teamwork with empathy, respect, and support.

4. Collaboratively draw or write their toolbox poster.

5. Share with class or reflect in journals.

Closing:

Each group shares one tool they used and why.

Extension: Post the toolbox posters around the classroom.

Handouts:

Printable Toolbox Cards
Group Reflection Prompt
Peer Conflict Scenario Examples

Activity 6-8: “Real Talk Circles”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Build empathy through structured peer-led dialogue. Practice conflict resolution and active listening.	Empathy, integrity, conflict resolution	Builds relational safety and voice. Encourages student leadership and choice.	Grades 6-8
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA M3, B-SS 1 Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Relationship Skills, Responsible Decision-Making	Student reflection or exit slip. Facilitator checklist on participation and empathy shown.	Talking piece (e.g., rock or plush) Real Talk prompts Circle norms poster	Group Activity (6–10 students)

Steps:

1. Set circle norms together (e.g.. respectful dialogue, honest sharing, active listening, empathetic support- you may wish to define these and share examples of each or role-play/ model what they look like in this situation ahead of time)

2. Use prompts to guide discussion, utilizing the ‘Real Talk Prompt Cards’ (e.g., “What do you do when someone hurts your feelings?”)

3. Pass the talking piece to ensure all voices are heard.

4. Reflect together on what was shared.

Closing:

End with a one-word check-out.
Extension: Invite students to co-create future prompts.

Handouts:

Real Talk Prompt Cards
Circle Exit Slip

Activity 6-8: “Walk It Back”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Guide students to reflect on impulsive reactions and reframe them. Support skill-building in emotional regulation and communication.	Accountability, emotional regulation, empathy	Builds safe space to deconstruct behavior without shame. Encourages cognitive flexibility and accountability.	Grades 6-8
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SMS 1: Demonstrate ability to manage transitions and adapt to change Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Self-Management, Responsible Decision-Making	Completion of reflective journal prompt. Verbal summary of what could be done differently next time.	Walk It Back reflection sheet Conflict Role Play strips	Independent (One-on-One)

Steps:

1. Review a recent peer conflict incident with the student.
   - Ask: “What was said/done? What could have changed the outcome?”
   - Explain how accountability is about accepting responsibility for actions- both positive and mistakes. By becoming self-aware of how we can make changes in the future, we are building our inner moral actions and improving who we are for the better.
   - Use a visual timeline to walk back the steps.

2. Create a plan for future reactions, emphasizing emotional regulation (with examples of how this particular student might approach this), empathy for self and others, courage to improve, and accountability.

Closing:

Students identify one thing they'll try next time.
Extension: Students make a peer resource card or tip sheet.

Handouts:

“Walk It Back” Reflection Sheet
Conflict Role Play Strips
Peer Resource Card

Activity 9-12: “Peer Mediation Bootcamp”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Train students in peer mediation techniques. Empower teens to manage conflict independently and fairly.	Leadership, fairness, assertiveness	Empowers youth voice and conflict agency. Creates systems of student-led support.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SS 5, M1 Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Responsible Decision-Making, Social Awareness	Mediation role-play rubric. Peer feedback forms.	Mediation role-play cards Peer mediator script Mediation reflection form	Group Activity (6–10 students)

Steps:

1. Introduce conflict resolution techniques and peer mediation concepts, utilizing the 'Conflict Resolution Techniques and Peer Meditation Concepts' handout.

2. Practice mediation steps in pairs.

3. Reflect on what worked and what was challenging. During this time, you can facilitate a discussion on how mediating conflict and resolving conflict involves accountability, leadership, empathy for others, active listening, courage and soliciting other ideas from the students.

4. Discuss what these mean and why they are relevant in real life.

5. Set class norms for conflict support, encourage use of character strengths discussed.

Closing:

Certificate of completion.
Extension: Offer mediation practice logs or real-time application.

Handouts:

Peer Mediation Role-Play Cards
Reflection Sheet
Conflict Resolution Techniques and Peer Mediation Concepts
Peer Mediation Bootcamp - Certificate of Completion

Activity 9-12: “Triggers & Transitions”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Identify personal triggers in peer conflict. Create personalized coping strategies for transitions and escalated moments.	Self-reflection, discipline, resilience	Builds regulation and personal agency. Reduces shame by focusing on solutions over punishment.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SMS 9, M5 Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL: Self-Management, Responsible Decision-Making	Students create a written action plan. Follow-up discussion on implementation.	Trigger Tracker worksheet Coping Strategy menu Journals	Independent (One-on-One)

Steps:

1. Discuss a recent conflict or emotional incident.
   - Identify what triggered the response.
   - Review transition strategies and coping tools.

2. Transition Strategies
   - “One Word Takeaway”
     Ask: “If you could sum up what you’re taking from today in one word, what would it be?”
     Helps the student anchor the session in a simple, memorable way and fosters self-reflection.

   - Coping Strategy Recap
     Invite the student to name one coping tool they already use and one new tool they want to try.
     Reinforces learning and builds confidence and resilience.

   - Next-Step Planning
     Together, decide on a small, realistic action they can try before the next session.
     Example: “When I get stressed about tests, I’ll practice the breathing strategy we learned.”

   - Rating Scale Check-In
     Begin and end with a 1–10 scale (“How stressed do you feel right now?”).
     Let the student see progress within the session, cultivating self-reflection.

   - Grounding Before They Leave
     A quick grounding technique (like 5–4–3–2–1 senses or deep breathing) to ensure they’re calm and regulated when transitioning back to class.

3. Coping Tools to Reinforce
   - Mindful Breathing
     Box breathing, 4-7-8 breath.

   - Positive Self-Talk
     Creating personal affirmations.

   - Movement Breaks
     Stretching, short walk, chair yoga.

   - Journaling
     Writing about feelings or keeping a stress log.

   - Reminders (“Take 3 deep breaths,” “Talk it out”).

   - Grounding Tools
     5 senses check, holding a grounding object.

   - Music / Art
     Using creative outlets to self-regulate.

4. Coping Menu (attached under Handouts) Pick one healthy option when stressed

5. Build a plan the student can revisit.

Closing:

Debrief and ask: “Which strategy feels doable this week?”
Extension: Encourage journaling progress.

Handouts:

Trigger Tracker
Personal Coping Plan Template
Coping Strategy Menu

Physical Abuse

Physical abuse is defined as a non-accidental injury to a child, caused by the act or failure to act of a person responsible for the care and welfare of the child, and can range from minor injuries to injuries that lead to death of the child (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019; National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, n.d.; Prevent Child Abuse America, n.d.). Some examples of physical abuse are, but not limited to: pulling hair/causing bald spots, biting, causing welts to form on skin, punching/hitting, beating with fists or objects, scalding with hot liquids, burning, fatal and non-fatal drowning, poisoning, choking, kicking, shaking/throwing, and stabbing with objects (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019; National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, n.d.; Prevent Child Abuse America, n.d.). Physical abuse is a common social problem, with recent data showing that 46% of child fatalities in 2018 resulted from physical abuse (Prevent Child Abuse America, n.d.).

Children who experience physical abuse often develop traumatic stress reactions. The impact can be far-reaching, especially when the abuser is someone the child depends on for protection and safety. Such experiences can lead to difficulties in developing and maintaining friendships, a lack of trust in authority figures, and a diminished sense of self-worth. Victims may also blame themselves for the abuse and feel compelled to keep it a secret. Reactions vary depending on the child's age, the nature of the abuse, and its duration (NCTSN, 2008). The effects of physical abuse can persist throughout an individual's life. Research indicates that childhood trauma can lead to biological signs of aging faster than children who have never experienced adversity. This accelerated aging process can result in earlier onset of age-related diseases and conditions (APA, 2020).

Effects on Children

Social Impact

Children who have experienced physical abuse display social attachment difficulties in a number of ways. Social withdrawal is a dynamic factor in creating social connections, and occurs across many types of child abuse, including physical abuse (Kamis & Copeland, 2023). They may stop trying to make friends or succeed at school or plan for the future (NCTSN, 2008). An important indicator of social withdrawal is a lower report of friendship connections, which can be a symptom of insecure attachment, lower self-esteem, and the anticipation of rejection by peers (Kamis & Copeland, 2023). While these children report having fewer friends, sadly, their peers also report that they are less popular and are not typically identified as friends by others (Kamis & Copeland, 2023). These factors lead to real struggles with peer and network socialization, causing these children to typically either have only one-on-one relationships, or to operate on the periphery of multiple groups, not being attached to or part of any of them (Kamis & Copeland, 2023).

Schools can emphasize empathy, respect, and restorative practices encourage peers to include rather than exclude vulnerable children. At the same time, character development initiatives that foster virtues such as kindness, fairness, and perseverance can be embedded into classroom culture to model healthy relationships and affirm each student's worth. Practical supports like structured peer-mentoring, cooperative learning groups, and guided friendship-building activities allow children who struggle socially to experience positive interactions in low-pressure environments. Together, these approaches create a school culture where students recovering from abuse can rebuild trust, strengthen self-esteem, and gradually form meaningful, supportive connections.

Emotional Impact

Children who experience physical abuse often suffer profound emotional consequences that can persist into adulthood. These effects encompass a range of psychological challenges, including difficulties in emotional regulation, trust, self-esteem, and interpersonal relationships. The APA notes that individuals who experience physical abuse often feel helpless and isolated, which can lead to the development of various psychological conditions, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

These conditions can persist long after the abusive events have ended (APA, 2020). Physically abused children commonly become aggressive themselves or have other behavioral problems wherein they "act out". On the other hand, some children show few, if any, reactions. They don't seem to care anymore if they are hit; they've lost the normal fight or flight reactions built-in to protect us from danger. These children may also fail to react to other dangers (NCTSN, 2008). Additionally, "some abused children become anxious and fearful rather than numb and withdrawn. This happens frequently when the abuse has no predictable pattern. A child who never knows when a caregiver will become physically violent, and never knows how far the caregiver will go, has no control. That child may become more anxious" (NCTSN, 2008, para. 4).

Schools can prioritize clear routines, consistent expectations, and calm responses to behavior. This reduces triggers and builds trust with caring adults who demonstrate respect and reliability (NCTSN, 2008). Teachers and staff who show empathy, patience, and understanding foster a sense of belonging. Pairing this with character strengths such as compassion, kindness, and fairness models healthy relational patterns and provides students with positive role models. Schools can teach strategies like mindfulness, breathing techniques, or structured reflection to help them manage overwhelming emotions. Linking this to character traits such as self-control and patience allows students to see these skills as strengths they can develop. Trauma often involves a loss of control. Allowing students choices in their learning and encouraging them to express their perspectives helps restore a sense of empowerment. This can be tied to virtues such as responsibility, courage, and respect. Curricula that emphasize empathy, humility, resilience, and respect provide students with language and frameworks to understand themselves and their interactions with others. This reinforces the protective role of positive character traits while equipping students with tools to navigate challenges. A trauma-informed, character-focused approach includes universal support (for all students) and targeted interventions (for those in greater need). For example, a mentoring program can integrate character education themes while providing relational safety for students processing trauma.

Physical Impact

Regarding childhood physical abuse, the most immediate physical impacts are injury, pain, and/or death as a result of the abuse. Less immediate are the impacts of physical child abuse that occur later in life as a result of the abuse. A 2012 meta-analysis of 124 studies exploring early abuse and later health outcomes found "robust evidence" linking physical abuse with depression, anxiety, eating disorders, suicide attempts, drug use, and sexually transmitted infections (Norman et al., 2012). Kaiser Permanente investigated a similar connection amongst 17,000 patients between 1995 and 1997, asking participants to self-report on ten different areas of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). When researchers looked at the relationship between ACEs and current health outcomes, they found that as the number of ACEs increased, so did the risk for negative outcomes (CDC, n.d.). The areas impacting physical health were risk of physical injury, maternal health, infectious disease, chronic disease, and risky behaviors (CDC, n.d.).

Schools can work to integrate a safe space for students by using daily emotional check-ins (using feeling charts, morning meetings, or one-word shares) to help students name emotions and feel seen. Create safe spaces in the classroom, such as a calm corner with sensory tools (stress balls, fidgets, coloring materials) where students can regulate emotions without shame. Integrate predictable routines and clear expectations that reduce anxiety and foster a sense of safety and stability. Schools should train teachers and provide restorative practices like guided conversations or conflict circles that repair relationships rather than punish, reinforcing dignity and belonging. Use character journaling or reflection prompts where students write or draw about values such as courage, kindness, or perseverance, linking personal growth to character development. Support students with peer mentoring or buddy systems to strengthen positive social connections and reduce isolation. Model empathy and respect consistently, with teachers explicitly teaching coping strategies (deep breathing, grounding exercises) when stress responses surface. Focus on strength-based recognition, where educators highlight resilience, effort, and acts of kindness, affirming students' strengths and identities beyond their trauma.

Cognitive Impact

Childhood physical abuse has been shown to put children at risk for cognitive delays, especially when it occurs during sensitive times of early brain development, and that these delays have ongoing impact on educational and employment success (Bick & Nelson, 2015; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019; Strathearn et al., 2020). There are studies that show long-term effects of abuse on specific sections of a child's developing brain. For example, researchers have found that children exposed to abuse can have a reduction of the hippocampus, which leads to issues with memory and recalling information (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2009). The same resource states that exposure to abuse can impair the connection between the right and left hemispheres of the brain, which leads to symptoms that are similar to attention hyperactivity disorder.

Schools can foster safety-focused relationships, and implement strategies for emotional regulation (e.g., mindfulness or calm-down spaces) to provide students with the stability and trust needed to engage cognitively despite past trauma. Teachers can differentiate instruction and provide memory supports like visual aids, repetition, and scaffolded tasks to counteract hippocampal-related memory difficulties. At the same time, character development practices such as explicitly teaching perseverance, self-regulation, and empathy not only strengthen social-emotional skills but also help rewire neural pathways through positive relational experiences. Schools can also train staff to recognize trauma responses that may look like ADHD and respond with supportive interventions rather than punitive discipline, ensuring students feel respected and valued. Together, these practical strategies foster resilience and create a safe learning environment that promotes both academic recovery and whole-person growth.

Where to Get Additional Support

NCTSN, Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators: https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//child_trauma_toolkit_educators.pdf

NCTSN, Talking to Children When Scary Things Happen https://www.nctsn.org/resources/talking-to-children-when-scary-things-happen

Prevent Child Abuse America https://preventchildabuse.org/

National Children's Alliance https://www.nationalchildrensalliance.org/

National Domestic Violence Hotline Languages: English, Spanish and 200+ through interpretation service; Hours: 24/7800-799-7233

Domestic violence shelters

The Child Welfare Information Gateway, What is Child Abuse and Neglect? Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms: https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/what-child-abuse-and-neglect-recognizing-signs-and-symptoms/

Activity K-2: “Drumming”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
This activity teaches students how to connect with others, increase endorphins, practice focus and listening, and also works on motor skills.	This activity targets the performance virtues, building confidence, determination, motivation, leadership, and teamwork.	This activity is designed to build the pillars of trauma-informed care, by increasing feelings of safety, connection and community within the classroom. Drumming is an activity that feels like play, which acts as a strong buffer against stress and fear.	All Ages
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
N/A	N/A	Drums of some kind. No drums? No worries! Buckets with paint stir sticks. Empty coffee ground containers. Empty tupperware. Garbage cans (warning: LOUD). Hands, feet, and desks. Anything laying around that makes noise when you hit it.	1:1 activity, small group, or large group

Steps:

To open this activity, the leader/teacher begins by having students form a seated circle, either on the floor or in chairs.

1. SET STANDARDS.
This is a very important step. Depending on what you are using for drumming and your particular classroom standards, the following suggested rules could be helpful:

- The leader directs when to touch and stop touching the drumming materials. Make this fun! Practice it like red light/green light, and this works for all levels. Assign student leaders to start and stop the drum touching, and practice this daily until mastered. It's helpful to have them do something with their hands when they are off the drums, like hands on head, ‘jazz’ hands, peace signs, fist bump a neighbor, etc.
- Only positive non-verbal communication during a drumming session. Again, make this fun and practice! Facial expressions matter, and drumming is a safe and supportive activity. No wrong rhythms!
- Try your best!

2. Warm up by starting a simple rhythm, like a heart-beat.

- Teachers can lead until the class develops proficiency and confidence, then people can be assigned to lead the activity.
- There's safety in numbers, and starting the whole group together gives students room to feel comfortable making mistakes.

Once the group is on target, change it up.

- This can be the teacher, or you can select other students to choose a rhythm for the group. It helps to create hand signals for ‘almost done’, ‘look at me’, and then hands-off materials.
- Practice, practice, practice these and use positive reinforcement for a job well done.

* A word about noise: Drumming, even with hands and feet, is LOUD. If you are in a classroom with neighbors, I've found it works best to plan with your neighbors for some loud activities, giving them a start and stop time. Hopefully you are lucky enough to have a big, sound-proof space to use, but successful classroom drumming can occur anywhere - that's sort of the beauty of this activity!

Closing:

To end this activity, have a routine established and practice for putting materials away. Once the drums are gone, this is a good time to ‘take the temperature’ of the group and see how everyone is feeling.

What went right? What still needs some work? What was your favorite part of drumming?

This activity can be very energizing and tiring for students, so depending on the group, quiet time or outside time might be needed. If you find out how they are feeling, the group will let you know what they need.

Activity K-2: “How to say NO!”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
This activity models and practices self efficacy and emotional regulation through the development of healthy refusal skills.	This activity targets the performance virtues of confidence and resilience.	This activity is designed to build one of the pillars of trauma-informed care, by increasing emotional regulation within the classroom. It also encourages feelings of control and safety to children, introducing them to the idea that they can advocate for themselves and have choices.	Any Age
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
N/A	N/A	Random items that are typically preferred for the average student, such as toys, games, candy, etc. A simple antecedent/behavior/consequence chart to allow for focus on what specific activity is leading to the behavior. Simple YES and NO cards, can be the words, emojis, green/red cards depending on the developmental level of the child/group.	Group

Steps:

- Many students who have experienced trauma are unable to advocate for themselves, resulting in refusal skills that vary from a complete inability to choose (freezing), to explosive and dangerous responses (fight or flight) when presented with choice or a non-preferred activity. This activity can be done in response to a particular student who struggles with choice and self-advocacy.

- Refusal skills are a component of good social skills, safety, and a healthy self-image. It is important to note that for the safety of our children, it is best practice for them to develop healthy refusal skills. We are NOT teaching compliance to every adult request, we are teaching children how to say no in a socially acceptable way.

- When using with an individual:

  * Data first! Using a simple three-column chart, track when the behavior happens, what precedes the behavior, what the behavior looks like, and what the child receives immediately following the behavior.
  * Example: When asked to sit at the table and play with Legos, Ethan sits down and interacts with staff. When staff begins using Legos to count, Ethan removes his shoes, stands up, spits, and attempts to flee the room. We would consider that counting was the antecedent, and we'd start with Ethan removing his shoes as the main behavior.
  * Once the behavior is isolated, you create a situation that will cause the child to display the maladaptive behavior that you are targeting. Prior to presenting the antecedent, introduce the activity verbally to explain what is going to happen next. Then ask the child if they want to participate in that activity: yes or no. This choice can be done with your hands, visual supports like cards, or using body language by nodding or shaking of the head.
  * Example: While coloring with a preferred staff, they will introduce counting by saying, “Ethan, we're going to practice counting now. Do you want to count with me? Yes or no (gesturing with hands)?”

  * This does not typically work immediately, it takes time. Learn what the child prefers: praise, high-fives, a little candy, a token of some kind... and have that hidden but ready. Watch the child's eyes, and if they even track towards the “NO” option, immediately praise and offer the reward. Verbally reinforce that it's ok to say no, and return to the previous preferred activity.

  * Example: After two weeks of trials that ended with shoes off, spitting, and elopement attempts, Ethan is again presented with counting during a favorite activity.
  Ethan slides off his shoes and stands up. Staff offers the choice of a “YES” or “NO” hand, and Ethan pauses and glances quickly at the “NO” hand. Staff moves the “NO” hand closer to Ethan, clarifying that Ethan has chosen no counting right now. That is followed with a high five, good job, and a small candy. The staff immediately redirects by returning to the preferred activity, and Ethan sits down and puts his shoes back on.

  * As the child begins to get comfortable saying “NO”, be prepared to continue to reinforce, fading external reinforcements as they become more consistent and comfortable. This activity will typically bleed into other areas, and can also be intentionally overlapped into things like food/snack choice, daily schedule choice, etc. As they feel comfortable, their confidence is building and it is alright to recognize and reinforce this.

  * The next step is to use the same reinforcement and response patterns to teach the difference between not wanting to do an activity and needing help. This is as simple as giving the child a choice between “No thank you” and “No I need help”. Once the reactive and fear-based response is gone, it becomes easier for a child to begin identifying needs and voicing those needs, building self-advocacy and resilience.

Closing:

Being able to say “NO” in a way that is socially acceptable is an important life skill for students to develop. People who cannot regulate themselves when faced with a non-preferred option or activity can struggle with maintaining relationships, housing, and employment. People who cannot make a choice are vulnerable to victimization. These skills are important to teach and reinforce.

That being said, there are also “non-refusal” scenarios within the school setting - times when a student simply cannot say “NO” due to issues of safety. The standard in this case is considered to be clear and imminent danger to self or others. When working with a student who exhibits any kind of dysregulated refusal skills, it is vital that the team explores those scenarios, and has a plan for what to do during those events. This is imperative not only for the safety of the child, but also to keep the team focused on self-advocacy rather than compliance.

For example: a child who freezes when it's time to get on the bus after school does NOT pose a clear and imminent danger to self or others. A child who elopes during a community-based field trip IS a scenario where the behavior poses clear and imminent danger to self or others.

Another example: a child who continually refuses to participate in a subject area, like math, PE, or music does NOT pose a clear and imminent danger to self or others. A child who throws their iPad communication device when asked to clean up IS a scenario where the behavior poses clear and imminent danger to self or others.

Activity 3-5: "Meeting Physical Needs"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
To assist children with self-regulation skills, by making sure that physical needs are met: water intake, blood sugar, movement, and sensory diet.	This activity serves to meet underlying needs, that will allow children to develop their intellectual virtues, such as critical thinking, autonomy, and reflection.	This activity helps teachers to focus on unmet physical needs, which when met, increase feelings of safety, and child's ability to regulate themselves physically and emotionally.	All Ages
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
N/A	N/A	Water bottles Healthy snacks Sensory sand, water beads, etc. Shaving cream Access to music Space to move Chew items Gum, mints in a variety of flavors	Group

Steps:

The key to meeting physical needs is to offer what's necessary on a regular schedule. Children who have experienced trauma quite often are not able to advocate for themselves, and may not be aware of feelings like thirst, hunger, and movement or sensory needs. If we take regular short breaks to fill these needs, it can increase a child's ability to focus and attend to the learning work that is happening in class.

Hydration. Water can be a challenge! Many classrooms do not come equipped with a potable water source, and allowing students access to a water fountain that may or may not be in close proximity can be difficult.

While challenging in some settings, the importance of hydration cannot be understated. Studies have shown that clinical dehydration can happen as quickly as several hours, especially with contributing factors like age, size, heat, and sodium intake. With many of our students eating heavily processed foods that are high in sodium, and drinking dehydrating drinks with sugar, salt, and caffeine, this problem is likely more common than reported. Even when moderately dehydrated, cognitive function, mood regulation, and anxiety levels can suffer.

Serving hydration needs means having water available in the classroom as needed. Depending on the setting, students can have disposable water bottles at their desks, or can have refillable containers that are filled and washed at school. Caring for items like these can also be extension life skills activities that lead to building a sense of classroom community.

A word about bathrooms: bathroom trips are physical movement breaks, and should never be used as a reason for not allowing or providing water for students. This can be managed by organized group bathroom breaks, or teaching students procedures and expectations for quietly leaving the room and returning as needed. Hydration and restroom breaks are basic human needs, and should not be withheld as a consequence for behavior or lack of learning.

Blood sugar. Like hydration, variations in blood sugar levels can negatively impact a child's cognitive functioning, mood stabilization, and anxiety levels. When working with populations who have been through trauma, it is recommended to provide some kind of snack or meal every two hours.

Providing snack in a school setting can be an opportunity to do more than meet a basic physical need. Snack sessions can be used to teach and reinforce choice. Preparing snacks can be used as life skills instruction, including handwashing and proper food handling. Snack time is a high interest activity that can encourage even the most reluctant communicators to ask their peers what they would like, and give those peers a chance to have a positive communication opportunity with another student.

Example: Following breakfast at 7:30am, snack can be provided at 9:30am. If lunch is served at 11:30am, the next snack can be provided at 1:30pm.

It is important to make provisions for some food to go home, in the event that a student does not have a resource-rich environment. Some school counselors have access to backpack programs which can send food home as well. I would encourage you to explore your school district's resources that are available for students who need food resources.

Movement. Like water and food, movement is a basic need, especially for children. Movement has been shown to be an enhancement to many important functions necessary for success in school. The ability to move as needed can enhance mood, memory, attention, cognitive function, and overall academic achievement.

Children should be given opportunities to move every two hours. Introducing movement into a classroom can be as simple as allowing children to choose the space in which they work: desk, floor, etc. Children can also be given options to work while seated or standing.

Other more obvious movement breaks are recess and PE. If those are not available, taking movement breaks for things like stretching, dancing, indoor games, and yoga are always free, with multiple examples available on the internet.

Like water and food, movement is a basic human need and should not be restricted based on behaviors or academic achievement. Taking away recess as a punishment is no different than punishing a child for being thirsty by taking away water. Healthy environments allow for movement.

Sensory needs. Every person seeks or avoids some sensory input. For example, many people love the smell of a scented candle, but will have a visceral reaction to the smell of raw onion. We are all built to have sensory requirements, but children who have experienced trauma may not be aware of what they want or need, and might not be able to advocate for themselves.
Unmet sensory needs can look like lots of repetitive movements, seeking out tight hugs, needing to wiggle and change positions frequently. Someone who is sensory avoidant might have sensitivities to certain foods, might not like getting their hands dirty, and seem reactive to loud noises and bright lights. Sensory avoidance can lead to a child becoming overwhelmed and exhibiting fight, flight, or freeze behaviors in response, especially if they have not learned the language to express what they need.

The key to providing what is called a "sensory diet" is providing a variety of tools and options and communicating with the child, or watching the child, to see what helps and what doesn't help. Sensory items/activities should always be introduced to the child, and consent should be given prior to trying something new. If the child shows aversion to the item/activity, then it should be discontinued immediately. Some children will be able to tell you what they prefer, but if they are non-verbal you will need to watch their body language very closely.

Example: In my classroom, we have a sensory table that is available for access at all times of the day. When a student is struggling, a staff member can grab an item off of the table and offer it to a student. We also prompt students to visit the sensory table if needed. Some items we keep at the table: sensory sand, foam, water beads, water, mints, cinnamon candy, bingo daubers, textured puzzles, whisper phones, etc.

Closing:

Students will show you what they need regarding sensory input. However, if you are working with a student whose needs exceed what you are able to provide within a reasonable classroom setting, your OT/PT support team is a good resource for ideas to help.

Activity 3-5: “Mood Meter”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
This activity teaches emotional regulation, but also serves the important need of predictability in routine, leading to feelings of safety.	This activity focuses on the moral virtues of compassion, courage, and honesty, as well as the intellectual virtue of reflection.	This activity is designed to build the pillars of trauma-informed care, by increasing feelings of safety, connection and community within the classroom, and helping to build emotional regulation.	Grades 3-5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
N/A	N/A	An age and ability level-appropriate Mood Meter. A Mood Meter can be found or created, it is a visual tool that uses color combined with words/faces/emojis to divide emotions into categories. A typical mood meter consists of red (high energy/negative), yellow (high energy/positive), blue (low energy/negative), and green (low energy/positive). There are many Mood Meters available for free download and use via the internet. The Mood Meter you choose to use can be printed for individuals to have in front of them, or displayed electronically on a whiteboard, or made into a poster. There are many ways this can be accomplished.	Group

Steps:

- To open this activity, the leader/teacher begins by modeling and using the Mood Meter themselves. It is important to model feelings across the full spectrum of the meter, not just happy feelings. I like to remind students that ALL emotions are valid, and it is not required that we are happy to do good work. I like to share that some of my very best work is done when I’m in the red - that angry energy can really get me moving sometimes! I also share that it takes a lot of courage to name our moods and feelings out loud and that being honest in doing so will help us feel better.

(Greet the group and establish rapport and attention.) Let’s dive into our Mood Meter today - I’m going to start!

I’m definitely in the yellow today: I’m so inspired by teaching you, and just really excited to get started with our lesson today!

OR: Today I’m in the red - the internet went down at my house and I didn’t get to watch my show last night, and I feel mad about that! Today you might notice my face looks like this (model upset face), or I might seem a little different. When I feel like this, what are some things I can do to feel better? (Try to get student suggestions, and use your own as well). Good idea! I can call today to get it fixed, I can read a book instead, or go for a walk. I could talk to my friend about how I’m feeling. I can take deep breaths (model square breathing), and count my blessings.

OR: Today I’m in the blue - I’m sad because I had an argument with my daughter. When I’m sad, my face looks like this (model sad face). What are some things I can do to feel better? (Try to get student suggestions, and use your own as well). Good idea! I can play with my dog, or talk to a friend, or give my daughter some time and talk it out over ice cream.

- Ask the group to all think for one minute about where they are on the Mood Meter. Depending on student age/ability, they can write it down, ‘waterfall’ in a group chat, color it on a chart, etc.

- Never require students to share outloud, but do always ask for them to share. With younger students, I find picking 3 to share is best, this activity can go very long! As they share, validate their choices, model compassion, and walk them through the same process you modeled. Encourage reflection. They can ask the group for ideas, or come up with their own.
Depending on the group, this can be a good activity to practice graphing, with a chart at the beginning of the day, and another one done at the end of the day.

Closing:

For closing, thank students for sharing, and for coming up with all those good ideas! If you collect group data and notice that the group is leaning more one way, this is a good time to acknowledge that as well. For example: This was a great morning meeting, and it looks like quite a few of us are feeling down and tired today. Let’s keep that in mind as we do our work today, and take some extra breaks to move, or maybe listen to some music. Can you help me remember that as we go through the day?

Activity 3-5: “Safe Calm Place”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will discuss themes of physical and emotional safety. Students will create a safe and calm place (real or imagined) to support emotional regulation.	Self-reflection, Empathy, Kindness, Gratitude, and Respect	Structured demonstration, peer empathy, and safe peer community.	Grades 3-5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competencies Self Awareness Self Management Relationship Skills	Teacher observation of student participation during discussion. Student Deliverable: Drawn picture of their safe, calm place.	Paper, pencil, drawing materials	Group

Steps:

1. Whole Group:
   - Let students know that today they will be learning about what the word safety means to them. Remind them that safety may look different for each student. Instruct students to trace both their left and right hands on a piece of paper. Write on the board what to do with each hand:
     Left Hand: In each finger, name 1 adult you feel safe with in your life. Fill every finger if you can.
     Right Hand: In each finger, name 1 safe environment in your life. Fill every finger if you can.
     Once students have completed their safe 5 in each hand, facilitate whole group discussion (focusing on gratitude, empathy, and self reflection):
   - Take a look at the different people and places in your life that make you feel safe, let's send some gratitude their way! Model: “Thank you ____ for making me feel safe!” Take a few student volunteers to share their gratitudes outloud.
   - What is it about the people you put on your list that help you feel safe?

   For some students it may have been easy to think of 5 safe people and places, for others this may have been harder. Without sharing personal answers, why do you think it may be hard for others to come up with their safe 5? Anticipated answer: Some students might not feel safe with adults or in their environments.
   How do you make others feel safe in your life? Anticipated answers may involve both physical and emotional safety - this would be a great opportunity to further discuss respecting emotional and physical boundaries, empathy and kindness for others..

2. Share some of your own adult reflections and perspectives on safety:

   Teacher Script: You all did an amazing job with this activity. I hope that you always remember that these safe adults are people you can talk to about anything, including if you don't feel safe. Let's talk about the word safety for a moment. Safety means that you feel physically and emotionally safe. I would imagine the adults you placed on your safe 5 all respect your body boundaries and treat you with respect and kindness.

3. Now we are going to do an activity where you get to create your very own SAFE CALM PLACE. This is a place you can go in your mind to feel calm and safe - it can be a place you have actually been or it can be a made up place! Students can lie on the floor or lay their head on their desk as they listen to the teacher read the CALM SAFE SPACE Meditation script.

Closing:

Finally, students will have the opportunity to draw their safe calm places adding detail and color! As you close the lesson, encourage students to share their safe calm places with other students. Empower students that they can “go” to their safe calm place at any time in their minds!

Handouts:

Calm Safe Space Guided Meditation Script (for teacher use)

Poverty

Growing up in poverty is an economic challenge and it is a form of chronic trauma that significantly affects children's development and learning. According to researchers at the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN, n.d.), families living in urban poverty often face repeated exposure to traumatic stressors such as violence, neglect, and housing instability without adequate support. These conditions create environments that compromise family functioning and resilience.

Neuroscience reveals that sustained stress “gets under the skin,” altering the architecture of a child's brain. Chronically elevated cortisol from environmental strain can degrade critical structures such as the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for executive functioning, and the hippocampus, which supports memory, while overloading the amygdala and making threat responses more automatic (Blair & Raver, 2016). Studies show that poverty erodes executive function skills, including working memory, attention control, and planning, which can be key capacities for literacy, math, and independent learning (Evans & Kim, 2013; UC Davis Center for Poverty Research, n.d.; C8 Sciences, n.d.).

Attachment research shows that unstable environments, such as those often associated with poverty, can disrupt secure caregiving relationships. This instability leaves children with inconsistent relational patterns, which can intensify the impact of trauma and weaken their ability to trust, a foundation that is essential for learning. (Bowlby, 1988; Ainsworth, 1989). Polyvagal Theory (Porges, 2011) further explains how chronic stress locks children into survival modes (fight, flight, or freeze) reducing their capacity for social engagement, play, reflection, or academic risk-taking.

Effects on Children

Personal Impact

Children in persistent poverty experience elevated stress hormone levels, which hamper executive functioning and sustained attention (Trafton, 2009). They often internalize shame due to unmet needs, leading to low self-esteem and a sense of invisibility (Evans & Kim, 2013). These challenges can create a cycle in which students disengage from learning or withdraw socially, further reinforcing feelings of inadequacy. Without intentional intervention, the weight of poverty can profoundly shape a child's sense of identity and potential.

VS Case Study - Poverty

A fourth-grade boy at Victory Schools struggled with the trauma of poverty, often arriving at school without proper clothing or new shoes. This left him feeling embarrassed and hesitant to participate in activities with peers. Victory teachers, along with the district's Angel Program, provided support while guiding him through the character pillar of courage. He practiced courage by showing up each day, raising his hand in class even when he felt self-conscious, and eventually accepting help from staff. The Angel Program provided new clothes and shoes, reinforcing that asking for and receiving support is a brave choice. With his confidence restored, he became more engaged academically and socially, no longer defined by what he lacked but by the courage he displayed. Today, he thrives in the classroom, modeling bravery and determination for his peers.

Educators can mitigate these effects through relational practices that build students' confidence and affirm their worth. Such strategies include intentionally highlighting strengths, celebrating small successes, and creating classroom routines that emphasize belonging and inclusion. When educators consistently recognize progress and provide authentic encouragement, students begin to develop a more positive self-concept and greater resilience. Over time, these daily practices not only restore hope but also empower students to view themselves as capable, valued contributors to their classroom communities.

Emotional Impact

Trauma stemming from economic instability often results in emotional dysregulation, which may manifest as unexpected outbursts, withdrawal, or emotional overwhelm (NCBI, 2014; ESCNEO, n.d.). Students may also develop a heightened sense of vigilance as a survival response, making it difficult to relax or fully engage in classroom activities. These emotional responses are not signs of defiance but rather indicators of chronic stress, which compromises a child's ability to trust and connect with others.

VS Case Study - Poverty:

A family of three siblings frequently came to school without food. Their home often had no electricity or running water. Instead of stigmatizing, our staff responded with Gratitude and Compassion lessons — teaching the siblings to both receive and extend kindness. We connected the family to resources and modeled what a caring community looks like. Not only did the students' attendance and engagement improve, but their mother also began volunteering at school events, saying, “I finally feel like people care about us.”

VS Case Study - Poverty:

A twelfth-grade student preparing for graduation faced the daily challenges of poverty, including food insecurity and lack of resources. Despite these struggles, the student remained committed to finishing school but often felt unseen by peers. Victory teachers guided the student through the character pillars of respect and compassion. Teachers modeled respect by affirming the student's resilience and created opportunities to highlight strengths in leadership roles. The student, in turn, practiced compassion toward peers who faced their own challenges, using personal experiences to connect and encourage. Through these practices, the student grew in confidence and became a source of inspiration to younger students. By graduation, the student walked across the stage not only as a survivor of poverty but as a respected leader whose compassion and character left a lasting mark on Victory Schools.

Educators can respond by creating emotionally safe environments that emphasize consistency, patience, and compassion. Building predictable routines, offering choices, and teaching explicit self-regulation strategies all help students feel more in control. Modeling calm responses to frustration and providing access to supportive adults, such as school counselors, further strengthen a child's ability to manage stress. With time, these practices build trust and emotional resilience, enabling students to redirect their energy toward learning and relationship-building.

Academic Impact

Poverty-induced brain changes directly impact working memory, attention, language acquisition, and metacognitive ability, all of which are foundational for reading, writing, and sustained academic tasks (UNC FPG Child Development Institute, n.d.; UC Davis Center for Poverty Research, n.d.; Trafton, 2009). Research indicates that deficits in executive functioning account for a sizable portion of the income-based achievement gap (C8 Sciences, n.d.).

Educators can address these academic barriers by scaffolding instruction, explicitly teaching executive function strategies (such as chunking, checklists, and visual supports), and embedding frequent opportunities for guided practice. Trauma-informed instructional routines and character education lessons that emphasize perseverance, responsibility, and growth mindset provide protective counterweights, helping students re-engage with learning and see themselves as capable.

Cognitive Impact

The cognitive demands of poverty extend beyond academics, affecting how children process and respond to the world. Constant stress taxes the brain's executive function system, leaving children with fewer resources to regulate impulses, shift attention, or plan ahead. These deficits can lead to challenges in both classroom learning and social interactions, as students may appear inattentive, impulsive, or unable to persist through challenging tasks. Over time, this can create a cycle where students disengage academically and lose confidence in their abilities.

Educators can disrupt this cycle by explicitly teaching metacognitive skills, modeling problem-solving strategies, and providing structured routines that reduce cognitive load. Practices like regular "think-alouds," guided reflections, and structured peer support systems not only build cognitive resilience but also reinforce character values like persistence and self-control.

Social Impact

Lacking a stable emotional safety net, students in poverty often struggle to form and maintain positive peer relationships. They may feel excluded due to differences in clothing, experiences, or opportunities, leading to isolation and difficulty navigating social dynamics (NCBI, 2014). Over time, this can result in diminished self-confidence and reluctance to participate in collaborative activities, further reinforcing the cycle of disconnection.

Schools can play a pivotal role in strengthening social bonds by fostering inclusive communities where every child feels seen and valued. Structured activities such as class meetings, cooperative learning, and peer-mentoring programs create opportunities for connection. Encouraging empathy, teaching conflict-resolution skills, and highlighting shared values help dismantle stigma and promote acceptance. These efforts not only enhance students' social skills but also contribute to a school culture where belonging and mutual respect are central.

Physical and Neurological/Neurodevelopmental Impact

The physiological effects of poverty-related stress are profound. Prolonged activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis raises cortisol levels that disrupt the brain regions responsible for executive functioning, memory, and emotional regulation (McEwen & Gianaros, 2010). Children exposed to unstable or unsafe environments may also show heightened startle responses, sleep disturbances, or hypervigilance, which are patterns often associated with post-traumatic stress. These neurological changes can make it difficult for students to remain calm, focused, and ready to learn.

Schools can buffer these impacts by creating calm, predictable classroom environments and integrating regulation strategies throughout the day. Movement breaks, mindfulness practices, and access to sensory tools give students ways to self-regulate, while character education lessons on resilience, courage, and self-care normalize the importance of tending to one's physical and emotional well-being. Together, these strategies help shift students from survival mode into a learning-ready state.

Conclusion

Poverty is more than a lack of material resources, it is an ongoing traumatic experience that shapes how children see themselves, relate to others, and engage with learning. The effects are deeply personal, emotional, academic, and social. Yet, trauma-informed approaches and intentional adult relationships can mitigate these effects. When educators build secure, predictable, and affirming environments, they counteract the impact of chronic stress and open pathways for students to develop resilience and thrive both emotionally and academically.

Where to Get Additional Support

Supporting students in poverty requires a multi-layered network of school, family, and community resources. While educators play a critical role in creating safe, predictable, and affirming classroom environments, external support is often essential for meeting students' broader needs. The following organizations and research centers provide tools, training, and insights specifically focused on understanding poverty as a form of trauma and offering practical strategies to mitigate its effects.

National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) – Offers resources on the intersection of poverty and trauma, including guides for educators and schools. https://www.nctsn.org

UC Davis Center for Poverty Research – Provides research briefs, fact sheets, and insights on how poverty affects child development and educational outcomes. https://poverty.ucdavis.edu

C8 Sciences – Focuses on the impact of poverty on executive function and offers practical, research-based strategies for supporting cognitive development in children. https://c8sciences.com

Harvard Center on the Developing Child – Publishes accessible research on toxic stress, poverty, and brain development, along with strategies for building resilience. https://developingchild.harvard.edu

Educational Service Center of Northeast Ohio (ESCNEO) – Provides training materials and educator resources on trauma and emotional regulation, particularly in the context of poverty. https://www.escneo.org

Activity 3-5: “More Than Meets the Eye – Seeing Our Value Beyond What We Have”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will explore the idea that their value is not determined by possessions or material circumstances, recognize strengths in themselves and others, and practice empathy toward peers with different life experiences.	Empathy, self-worth, respect, gratitude, compassion	Builds a safe space for students to share without judgment, uses asset-based thinking to focus on skills and character rather than material resources, offers choice in participation, and normalizes differences in lived experiences.	Grades 3-5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness & Social Awareness – Recognizing self-worth and respecting others' perspectives	Observation of engagement, completion of the “What Makes Me Valuable” worksheet, quality of reflections and group interactions.	Short story or video that emphasizes personal worth over material wealth (e.g., “Those Shoes” by Maribeth Boelts or similar) “What Makes Me Valuable” worksheet (center circle for self, surrounding circles for strengths and positive qualities) Chart paper and markers for group brainstorm of “Ways We Show Our Value”	whole group introduction, individual reflection, and small group sharing

Steps:

1. Warm-Up Discussion:
   - Ask: “What makes a person valuable? Is it what they own? Is it how they act? Or something else?”
   - Guide discussion toward qualities such as kindness, creativity, perseverance, helpfulness, and skills.

2. Activity 1 – Story Connection:
   - Read or show the selected story/video (e.g., “Those Shoes” by Maribeth Boelts or similar).
   - Prompt students to notice:
     What the main character wanted versus what they truly needed.
     How their value showed up in the story.

3. Activity 2 – Class Brainstorm:
   - On chart paper, title a page “Ways We Show Our Value.”
   - Students contribute examples that have nothing to do with possessions (e.g., helping a friend, sharing ideas, making someone laugh, being a good teammate).

4. Activity 3 – What Makes Me Valuable Worksheet:
   - In the center circle, students write their name or draw a picture of themselves.
   - In the surrounding circles, they write or illustrate positive qualities, strengths, or actions that make them valuable.
   - Encourage them to focus on traits and behaviors, not possessions.

5. Activity 4 – Partner Share:
   - Students pair up to share one or two qualities from their worksheet.
   - Partners can respond with, “I see that in you because…” to affirm each other.

Closing:

Closing reminder:
- Our worth comes from who we are, not what we own.
- Everyone has unique strengths that make them valuable to their community.
- Seeing value in others helps build respect and kindness.

Extension: Create a classroom “Value Tree” where each student adds a leaf with their name and a word representing one of their qualities.

Handouts:

What_Makes_Me_Valuable_Worksheet.pdf

Activity 4-8: “Planting Seeds for My Future – Growing Dreams Through Small Steps”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will envision positive possibilities for their future, identify personal strengths that can help them succeed, and create small, actionable steps toward a goal.	Hope, perseverance, self-discipline, optimism	Creates a safe, encouraging environment, focuses on strengths and future opportunities, offers choice in goal-setting, and builds agency by emphasizing student ownership of their steps forward.	Grades 4-8
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competency: Self-Management & Self-Awareness – Setting and working toward personal goals	Completion of “My Goal Garden” worksheet, observation of engagement in discussion, quality of self-reflection.	“My Goal Garden” worksheet (center space for main goal, surrounding leaves for action steps) Who Was Jackie Robinson? by Gail Herman Chart paper or whiteboard for group brainstorm on “qualities that help seeds grow” and how these relate to personal growth Markers, crayons, or colored pencils	whole group introduction, individual reflection, and optional sharing

Steps:

1. Warm-Up Discussion:
   - Ask: “Have you ever planted a seed? What does it take for that seed to grow?”
   - You might consider reading the book: Gibbons, G. (1991). From seed to plant. Holiday House. To discuss what may be needed to help seeds grow.
   - List answers (water, sunlight, care, time) and connect them to personal growth (effort, learning, support, patience).

2. Activity 1 – Planting the Idea:
   - Explain: “Just like seeds grow into plants, our dreams and goals can grow when we take care of them with small actions over time.” (connect to hope and optimism)
   - Share a short story or example of someone who started with very little but worked toward a goal with persistence (connect to perseverance).
   - You might consider sharing the book Who Was Jackie Robinson? by Gail Herman

3. Activity 2 – My Goal Garden Worksheet:
   - In the flower or garden outline, students write or draw one personal goal in the center (academic, personal, or skill-based).
   - In each surrounding leaf or petal, they write one small step they can take toward that goal. (connect to self-discipline)
   - Encourage them to include both things they can do on their own and things they can do with help from others.

4. Activity 3 – Optional Partner Share:
   - Students can share one action step with a partner.
   - Partners give encouraging feedback or suggest another possible step.

5. Activity 4 – Class “Garden of Goals” Display:
   - If students are comfortable, post completed worksheets together to create a class “garden” as a visual reminder of persistence and possibility.

Closing:

Closing reminder:
- Goals grow best when we take small, steady steps.
- You already have strengths and skills to help you grow.
- Asking for help is part of making your dreams possible.

Extension: Revisit the “Goal Garden” after one month to check in on progress and add new “leaves” for steps completed or new ideas.

Handouts:

My_Goal_Garden_Worksheet.pdf

Activity 6-8: “Strength in Every Story – Recognizing Resilience in Ourselves and Others”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will identify personal strengths developed through life challenges, explore how adversity can build resilience, and develop empathy for peers who may have different life experiences.	Resilience, empathy, self-awareness, respect, gratitude	Affirms each student’s inherent worth, avoids stigmatizing language, focuses on asset-based reflection, provides choice in self-disclosure, and fosters a safe, supportive classroom environment.	Grades 6-8
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness & Social Awareness – Recognizing personal strengths and understanding the perspectives of others	Observation of participation, completion of “My Strength Story” worksheet, quality of discussion contributions.	Short story, video, or poem highlighting resilience through economic hardship (e.g., excerpt from Last Stop on Market Street by Matt de la Peña for middle grades, or an age-appropriate spoken word video) “My Strength Story” worksheet (space for reflection and identifying strengths from personal experiences) Chart paper and markers for group brainstorming	whole group introduction, individual reflection, optional partner sharing

Steps:

1. Warm-Up Discussion:
   - Ask: “What does it mean to be strong? Is it just about physical strength, or can it mean something else?”
   - Guide students toward understanding strength as perseverance, problem-solving, kindness, and adaptability.

2. Activity 1 – Story Connection:
   - Share the chosen story, video, or poem.
   - Discussion prompts:
     - What challenges did the main character face?
     - What personal strengths helped them keep going?
     - How did the people around them support them?

3. Activity 2 – My Strength Story:
   - Distribute the worksheet.
   - Students privately reflect on a time they overcame a challenge (can be big or small, recent or in the past).
   - Prompts include:
     - What was the challenge?
     - What personal strengths did you use to get through it? (i.e. resilience, empathy, self-awareness, respect, gratitude: you may wish to brainstorm these ahead of time or discuss them in activity 1 for full understanding)
     - Who or what supported you?
   - Remind students they do not have to share details they are not comfortable sharing.

4. Activity 3 – Optional Sharing:
   - Students can share their stories in pairs or small groups, focusing on the strengths and lessons learned rather than the challenge details.

5. Activity 4 – Class Strength Wall:
   - On sticky notes, each student writes one strength they identified in themselves.
   - Collect and post on a “Strength Wall” as a visible reminder of the resilience in the room.

Closing:

Closing reminder:
- Strength comes in many forms — and often from facing challenges.
- We all have strengths worth recognizing and celebrating.
- When we focus on strengths, we can see ourselves and others more positively.

Extension: Invite students to interview a family member or community member about a challenge they overcame and the strengths they used, then bring back a “strength word” from that story to add to the Strength Wall.

Handouts:

My_Strength_Story_Worksheet.pdf

Activity 9-12: “Strengths in My Story ”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
To help students identify and celebrate the skills, resilience, and resourcefulness they've developed through lived experiences with poverty, framing those strengths as assets for their future.	resilience, creativity, perseverance, empathy, responsibility, leadership	Safety & Empowerment: Activity focuses on assets, not deficits. Voice & Choice: Students decide what to share and what to keep private. Resilience-Focused: Reframes poverty from shame to strength. Hope-Building: Encourages students to link survival skills to future success.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 2: Self-Management CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills	Formative, Reflective, and Trauma-Informed: Timeline & Trait Labels (Product): Students' Resilience Timelines should clearly connect at least 3 lived experiences to character traits. Reflection Writing (Process): Students explain how at least one character trait will support them in their present or future. Participation (Optional): Students who share aloud receive informal feedback affirming their insights. Rubric (3 levels): Emerging: Student identifies 1–2 strengths/ traits with limited explanation. Proficient: Students identify 3+ traits with clear reflection on their role in past experiences. Advanced: Students connect 3+ traits to both past experiences and future goals.	Circle of chairs Journals, chart paper, other paper Writing utensils	Small group/whole class

Steps:

1. Opening Reflection (5 minutes)
   - Teacher prompt: “Our toughest challenges often shape some of our greatest strengths. Today, we’re going to recognize the character traits that have helped you along your journey.”

2. Story Mapping (15 minutes)
   - Students create a “Resilience Timeline” with 3–5 key moments where they overcame a challenge related to scarcity, responsibility, or problem-solving.
   - Instead of focusing on pain, highlight responses: resourcefulness, leadership, care for family, etc.

3. Character Trait Connection (10 minutes)
   - At each timeline point, students choose a character trait that was strengthened.
   - Provide a list of traits (e.g., resilience, empathy, perseverance, creativity, gratitude, leadership, courage). Prompt: “Which trait did this challenge help you develop?”

4. Strength Naming & Reflection (10 minutes)
   - Students write 3–5 sentences connecting their traits to their identity.
   - Example: “When I helped my younger siblings with homework while my parents worked, I developed responsibility and leadership. This taught me I can guide others.”

5. Optional Sharing (5–10 minutes)
   - Invite volunteers to share one strength/trait they’re proud of.
   - The teacher affirms and normalizes: “These traits are powerful tools for your future. They are not small—they’re the foundation of success.”.

Closing:

1. From Past to Future (5 minutes)
   Teacher prompt: “Now that you’ve identified strengths you’ve gained, let’s think about how those can shape your future.”

2. Vision Creation (15–20 minutes)
   Students create a mini vision board (digital or paper) that blends: At least two strengths from their resilience timeline.
   - One short-term goal (this year)
   - One long-term dream (career, personal, or life aspiration).

3. Closing Reflection (5 minutes)
   - Students write a short affirmation tying their strength to their goal.
   - Examples: “My perseverance will help me graduate.” “My creativity will guide me to design a career I love.”

Activity 9-12: "The Resourceful Me – Finding Strength in Creativity and Problem-Solving"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will recognize how navigating challenges can build resourcefulness and creativity, identify ways they have solved problems with limited resources, and learn how these skills are valuable in school, work, and life.	Resilience, resourcefulness, perseverance, self-efficacy	Centers student voice and lived experience, avoids deficit framing, affirms problem-solving as a strength, and allows for choice in sharing.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness & Responsible Decision-Making – Recognizing personal strengths and using them to make constructive choices	Completion of "My Resourceful Moments" worksheet, quality of reflections, and contributions during discussions.	Short video, article excerpt, or TED Talk clip about resourcefulness and overcoming challenges (e.g., youth entrepreneur stories, innovators who started with very little) "My Resourceful Moments" worksheet (space to record challenges, creative solutions, and resulting strengths) Chart paper for a class "Wall of Creative Solutions"	whole group intro, individual reflection, partner/small group sharing, and whole group wrap-up

Steps:

1. Warm-Up Discussion:
   - Ask: "What does it mean to be resourceful? Can you think of a time you made the most of what you had?"
   - Discuss how being resourceful can come from both opportunities and challenges. E
   - Examples might include: Turning mistakes or setbacks into learning opportunities, Taking advantage of access to tools, technology, or information in innovative ways, Leveraging networks, mentors, or partnerships to open new doors, and Recognizing potential in situations that others might overlook.

2. Activity 1 – Story Connection:
   - Share a short video or reading highlighting a real person who solved problems in creative ways with limited resources.
   - You might consider using this Ted Talk of Navi Radjou that highlights real-world instances where simple, cost-effective solutions overcame big challenges: https://youtu.be/cHRZ60rSvvI?si=925pqWqlu8WKeRmG
   - Prompt discussion:
     * What challenges did he face?
     * How did he think creatively to solve problems?
     * What strengths did he gain from those experiences?

3. Activity 2 – My Resourceful Moments:
   - Give each student the worksheet.
   - Prompts include:
     Describe a time when you had to solve a problem with limited resources (materials, time, or money).
     What creative solution did you use?
     What did you learn about yourself from this experience?
   - Students reflect independently, with the option to keep their responses private.

4. Activity 3 – Partner or Small Group Share (Optional):
   - Students who feel comfortable can share one example from their worksheet.
   - List examples of student generated "resourceful strategies" on chart paper (no names attached).

5. Activity 4 – Class "Wall of Creative Solutions":
   Collect anonymous strategies and display them on a poster or digital board to show the wide range of problem-solving skills in the group.

Closing:

Closing reminder:
- Resourcefulness is a powerful skill that helps in school, work, and relationships.
- Many challenges can build strengths that last a lifetime.
- Your ability to think creatively is part of your personal value.

Extension: Students research a historical or contemporary figure known for their resourcefulness and present on how that skill shaped their success.

Handouts:

My_Resourceful_Moments_Worksheet.pdf

Professional Development: “Dignity: Seeing Potential, Not Poverty”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
To surface and examine personal assumptions or biases about children and families experiencing poverty. To recognize how socio-economic realities might influence adult expectations, patience, or interactions. To practice reframing deficit-based narratives into dignity-centered affirmations. To recommit to accompaniment practices that honor every child’s worth and potential, regardless of their family’s income, housing, or neighborhood.	Through the reflection, adults can build empathy, humility, compassion, fairness, respect	This activity reinforces self-awareness, equity, and relational safety. Poverty can be stigmatizing when misinterpreted through assumptions. By reflecting privately, adults can safely acknowledge and challenge their own implicit biases. Reframing toward dignity restores agency and belonging for children, ensuring that adult to child interactions and expectations build resilience rather than reinforce stigma.	Adults (educators, mentors, social workers, caring adults)
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 2: Self-Management CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills CASEL Core 5: Responsible Decision-Making	N/A	Pen and paper, journal, or digital device for private reflection A quiet space or calming background music (optional) Reflection prompts (printed or displayed) Optional: breathing or grounding script to open and close the session	Single individual, self-led

Steps:

1. Start
   - Find a quiet space.
   - Read the following quietly or aloud:
     A child’s dignity is whole, regardless of their family’s income or neighborhood. Poverty may shape experience, but it does not define worth.
   - Take three grounding breaths.
   - Reflection Prompts
     Take your time. There’s no rush to finish. This is about practice, not perfection.

2. Journal:
   - What feelings come up for me when I think of children experiencing poverty?
   - Have I ever adjusted my expectations, consciously or unconsciously, because of a child’s socio-economic circumstances?
   - Reflect on how these assumptions may shape your tone, expectations, or patience.

3. Make a two-column chart:
   - Column A: Write down deficit-based phrases or assumptions society attaches to poverty (e.g., “underprivileged,” “unprepared,” “at-risk”).
   - Column B: Reframe them into dignity-centered affirmations (e.g., “Resourceful,” “Resilient,” “Creative problem-solver”).
   - Circle one affirmation to carry into your practice.

4. Reflect: How can I affirm a child’s dignity without reducing them to their socio-economic circumstances?
   - Write a personal pledge statement, beginning with:
     “I recommit to accompanying children experiencing poverty by…”

-Examples:
  “…holding high expectations rooted in belief, not pity.”
  “…celebrating resourcefulness and creativity as strengths.”
  “…ensuring access, equity, and belonging in my classroom community.”

Closing:

Read the following affirmation quietly or aloud:
- Every child is more than their circumstance. My role is to honor their dignity and walk with them toward possibility.
- If comfortable and appropriate, place your pledge somewhere visible in your workspace or somewhere you’ll see it from time to time. (I.e. inside laptop, journal, etc.).

Reflect on how this activity helped you to cultivate empathy, humility, compassion, fairness, and/or respect

Professional Development: "Seeing Strengths Beyond Circumstances – Supporting Students Experiencing Poverty"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	**Character Traits Targeted:**	**Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:**	**Age Range:**
Participants will explore how poverty impacts students' school experiences, identify trauma-informed strategies that foster resilience and belonging, and learn character education practices that affirm students' dignity and strengths.	Empathy, respect, compassion, equity, resilience	Builds awareness of systemic barriers without blaming individuals, centers student dignity, promotes relationship-based support, and emphasizes predictable, inclusive, and affirming classroom practices.	Adults
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competency: Social Awareness & Relationship Skills – Understanding diverse backgrounds and building inclusive relationships Learning for Justice Social Justice Standards: Diversity & Justice – Recognizing inequities and promoting fairness	Participant engagement in discussion, contributions to strategy brainstorming, completion of reflection/action plan.	Short video or first-person narrative on the impact of poverty on education (e.g., StoryCorps, Edutopia, or local community story) Examples: Making It Living on One Dollar | Four Friends Surviving in Rural Guatemala | FULL DOCUMENTARY "Barriers & Bridges" handout (two-column sheet for listing challenges and solutions/ strategies) Chart paper, markers, sticky notes	Group

Steps:

1. Welcome & Framing (5 minutes)
   - Share: "Today, we are learning how to see beyond circumstances and focus on student strengths, while understanding the barriers poverty can create."
   - Norms: Assume positive intent, share without judgment, and protect confidentiality.

2. Activity 1 – Story Connection (10 minutes)
   - Show the selected short video from the materials list or read a personal narrative.
   - In pairs, discuss: What challenges did the student face?
   - What personal strengths did you notice in the student's story?

3. Activity 2 – Silent Gallery Walk (10 minutes)
   - Around the room, post four prompts on chart paper:
     Barriers students experiencing poverty might face in school.
     Strengths and skills these students often develop.
     Practices in schools that may unintentionally harm or exclude them.
     Practices that promote belonging and dignity.
   - Participants circulate, adding sticky notes with responses.

4. Activity 3 – Barriers & Bridges Planning (20 minutes)
   - Distribute the "Barriers & Bridges" handout.
   - In small groups, select 3–4 common barriers identified in the gallery walk.
   - For each barrier, brainstorm trauma-informed, character-focused strategies that could "build a bridge" for students (e.g., flexible deadlines, relationship-building routines, discreet access to resources).

5. Activity 4 – Share & Synthesize (10 minutes)
   - Groups share one high-impact strategy.
   - Facilitator records on a master "Bridges for Belonging" chart for all to reference.

Closing:

Closing reminder:
- Poverty is a circumstance, not a character trait.
- Students bring valuable skills and perspectives shaped by their experiences.
- Our role is to create predictable, affirming environments that reduce barriers.

Extension: Create a "Belonging Action Plan" for your classroom using one new strategy from today's session and revisit its impact after one month.

Handouts:

Barriers_and_Bridges_Worksheet.pdf

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD, is a mental health condition that occurs as the result of being exposed to death or the threat of death, serious injury, or sexual violence (CDC, 2025; SANHSA, 2014; Stanford Medicine Children's Health, 2025). PTSD occurs after experiencing trauma, and symptoms are usually characterized as persisting for a month or longer, and can start immediately or up to six months after the event or events (SANHSA, 2014; Stanford Medicine Children's Health, 2025). Symptoms of PTSD in children can be: re-enacting the event while playing, displaying aggression, losing interest in preferred activities, sleeping issues, being easily triggered, having a flat affect or lack of positive emotions, intense emotions such as fear or anger, being hypervigilant to danger, being socially withdrawn or grouchy, having behavior problems and/or trouble paying attention at school, behavioral regression, complaining frequently of headaches, stomachaches, and muscle aches, and avoiding things and/or people that remind them of the trauma (CDC, 2025; Stanford Medicine Children's Health, 2025).

VS Case Study - PTSD:

A ninth-grade boy at Victory Schools carried trauma-related stress from repeated exposure to violence in his neighborhood. His PTSD symptoms included difficulty sleeping, irritability, and falling behind academically. Victory teachers, in collaboration with counseling services, focused on building the character pillar of self-discipline. He established daily routines for studying, attending tutoring, and practicing mindfulness strategies to manage anxiety. Self-discipline gave him tools to take ownership of his choices, even when emotions felt overwhelming. Over time, he showed progress by improving his grades, staying consistent in extracurricular commitments, and managing stress in healthier ways. Today, he thrives in his classes and demonstrates how self-discipline can empower students to regain stability despite trauma.

Events that contribute to PTSD can be personally experienced, personally witnessed, or learned about as an event that involved someone close to the child, or when a child is exposed to negative outcomes of trauma on others (SANHSA, 2014). PTSD can be caused by child abuse and neglect, illness and/or death of someone close to the child, war, disaster either man-made or natural, car accidents, animal attacks, personal attacks, and bullying (CDC, 2025; SANHSA, 2014, Stanford Medicine Children's Health, 2025). Not all children develop PTSD due to trauma, there are factors that can put a child at more risk, such as lack of community and family support, if the trauma was recurring, if it was serious and long-lasting, if the child was very close to the event physically, being female, and having a previous history of trauma (Hamblen & Barnett, 2025; Stanford Medicine Children's Health, 2025).

Effects on Children

Social Impact

Children experiencing PTSD carry with them all the same struggles with making social connections that research has found in other childhood traumas, such as social withdrawal and isolation, hypersensitivity to rejection, struggles with emotional regulation, difficulty reading social cues, difficulty understanding and expressing empathy, and a difficulty perceiving social supports, warmth, and encouragement from others (Connections for Abused Women and their Children, 2024; Zheng et al., 2025). While children experiencing PTSD can struggle with making social connections, research has also shown the importance of a supportive community response as a mitigating factor to developing PTSD, and if already developed, the lessening of symptom severity (Larsen, 2025). This research points to the importance of building community support, especially for children who struggle with building those supports themselves.

Schools can help mitigate the social effects of PTSD by intentionally creating trauma-informed, character-centered environments that foster safety, belonging, and connection. Teachers and staff can use predictable routines, gentle check-ins, and restorative practices to support emotional regulation and reduce feelings of rejection or isolation. Lessons that explicitly teach empathy, perspective-taking, and communication can help students practice reading social cues and building positive relationships in structured, supportive settings. Peer mentoring and cooperative learning groups provide opportunities for safe social interaction, while adult modeling of compassion and patience reinforces the value of community support. Embedding character education, such as fairness, respect, and kindness within daily interactions not only cultivates a culture of care but also helps children perceive and trust social supports, ultimately lessening the severity of PTSD-related struggles.

Emotional Impact

Children experiencing PTSD have a complicated relationship with attachment disorders. With trauma at the base of PTSD, these children are at very real risk of developing insecure attachments, which are characterized by behavioral issues, lack of empathy, struggles with eye contact, and difficulty with being successful academically (Attachment & Trauma Network, n.d.). But, research has shown that children who already have insecure attachments are more likely to develop PTSD, and when they do, the symptoms will be expressed with more severity (Karatzias et al., 2021). Children who are most at need for social connection and support, are the ones who are possibly going to struggle the most with seeking out those connections.

Schools can help mitigate the emotional effects of PTSD by intentionally fostering safe, predictable, and supportive environments grounded in trauma-informed and character development best practices. Teachers and staff can build consistent routines and use calm, empathetic communication to reduce anxiety and strengthen trust, while offering opportunities for students to practice self-regulation through mindfulness, movement breaks, or quiet reflection spaces. Relationship-building strategies such as assigning trusted adults, implementing mentoring programs, and using restorative practices can help children experience reliable connections that counteract insecure attachments. Integrating explicit character education with emphasis on empathy, respect, and resilience further provides students with the language and models for healthy relationships. By prioritizing connection before correction and creating environments where every child feels seen, valued, and safe, schools can serve as protective spaces that nurture healing and growth despite the challenges of trauma.

Physical Impact

PTSD, which is a disorder rooted in trauma, is a leading contributor to neurochemical disruption, as described above. In addition, children who are experiencing PTSD can also experience sleep issues, aggression, flashbacks of trauma that include physical sensations such as smells and sounds, and physical signs of regression such as issues with feeding and toileting (Stanford Medicine Children's Health, 2025). Childhood trauma, like PTSD, can also lead to long-term health impacts, such as a greater likelihood of sustaining physical injuries, maternal health risks, and a greater rate of being impacted by infectious and chronic diseases (CDC, n.d.).

Schools can create calm, structured classroom environments with consistent routines to reduce anxiety, integrating mindfulness and breathing exercises to regulate stress responses, and offering safe spaces for students to de-escalate when experiencing flashbacks or aggression. Teachers and staff can be trained to recognize physical manifestations of trauma and respond with empathy rather than punishment, while embedding character development practices such as fostering self-regulation, resilience, and empathy in daily lessons. Collaboration with school counselors, nurses, and families ensures that sleep concerns, regression, and health risks are addressed holistically, reinforcing the message that students are supported, valued, and not defined by their trauma.

Cognitive Impact

In addition to the trauma-based impacts listed above, children experiencing PTSD can also experience other unique cognitive challenges. Maladaptive thinking, also called cognitive error, causes individuals to interpret a current situation as dangerous, even when it is clearly very safe (Ouhmad et al., 2023; SANHSA, 2014). Survivors of a traumatic event can experience overwhelming guilt, especially when they survived an event and others did not (SANHSA, 2014). Another example of maladaptive thinking is called denial defense, which is a protective behavior in which a child will push out memories of violent/traumatic episodes using idealized memories of the abuser (Mosquera & Knipe, 2017). It is important to remember when working with these children that these processes, while maladaptive, are also protective.

Teachers and staff can use grounding strategies, predictable routines, and calm redirection to help students reframe maladaptive thinking and reduce feelings of imminent danger. Building strong, trust-based relationships allows students to feel secure enough to challenge denial defenses and distorted guilt, while reflective practices such as journaling, restorative circles, or guided discussions provide healthy ways to process experiences. Embedding content that cultivates resilience, empathy, and self-compassion within daily instruction reinforces students' ability to recognize their inherent worth and reframe negative self-beliefs. In addition, schools can provide access to counseling services, small-group interventions, and mindfulness-based exercises that teach students regulation skills, helping them navigate intrusive thoughts with greater balance. By combining trauma-informed practices with character education, schools create an environment where students are supported in both healing and growth.

Where to Get Additional Support

NCTSN, Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators: https://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/resources//child_trauma_toolkit_educators.pdf

Child Mind Institute – guidance and provider connections. https://childmind.org/

PTSD Alliance – information for children and families. https://www.ptsdalliance.org/

The Child Welfare Information Gateway, What is Child Abuse and Neglect? Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms: https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/what-child-abuse-and-neglect-recognizing-signs-and-symptoms/

Activity K-2: “My Emotional Cup”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will learn about their window of tolerance and learn new ways to emotionally regulate.	Resilience, empowerment, courage	Students who experience trauma may have a narrow window of tolerance often finding themselves in hyper or hypo-arousal. This demonstration will aid students in understanding this experience, providing them age -appropriate language to describe their experience, and empower them to use learned tools to get back in their window. Teacher will facilitate safe group discussion and predictable structure.	Grades K–2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competencies - Self Awareness Self Management	Teacher observation of student discussion/ participation.	Scenarios for Emotional Cup printed and individually cut out 3 clear cups (1 filled with ice, 1 with water up to halfway, and 1 full to the top)	Group

Steps:

1. PREPARATION:
    - Set up a table at the front of the classroom and have three separate, clear cups. Fill them accordingly:
        Left cup: Fill with cubes of ice (representing hypo-arousal - “freeze” response)
        Middle cup: Fill with water midway (representing emotionally regulated)
        Right cup: Fill with water to the top (representing hyper-arousal - “fight/flight” response)

2. BEGIN THE LESSON (Whole Group):
    - Have students join you on the floor in front of the prepared table.
    - Prompt them to make observations about the cups on the table - what makes each of these cups different? (Tell your shoulder partner).
    - Once a few students have shared with the group, let them know that these different cups represent their “Emotional Cups”.
    - Let them know that everyone (including you, the teacher!) has an emotional cup and feels each of these ways throughout your day.

3. Begin the demonstration:

- Script: “Let’s start with the middle cup. The water in the cup is still and calm. This is how I feel right now. When my emotional cup is still and calm, I can make important decisions, I can learn, I feel good in my body, and I am breathing slow and easy. Let’s all practice what it feels like when you’re the middle cup! Everyone, take 3 deep breaths with me.”

- Tell your shoulder partner how you feel after your 3 breaths. (building resilience and courage)

- Now let’s take a look at the cup on the right. This one is REALLY full! What do you think would happen if this cup ran over a bump? (let them share outloud). You’re right, it would probably spill all over! Sometimes when I hit a bump in my day, my emotions spill over, my heart beats fast, and I may feel frustrated, upset, or overwhelmed. The teacher can shake the cup, causing a little spill.

- Instruct students to stand up and jog in place. Instruct them to place their hand over their heart. When your emotional cup spills over it feels a lot like when our bodies get moving around a lot. Sometimes emotions feel like this.
Tell your shoulder partner how you feel after jogging in place. Now let’s see if we can feel like our middle cup again - lead them through 3 long breaths. (building resilience and courage)

- Finally, let’s take a look at the cup on the left. This one has ice in it. Sometimes our emotions can feel like this. It can feel like we are frozen. Just like ice, when we feel shut down or frozen, we don’t move around very much or say very much at all. Sometimes it feels like we can’t feel anything at all. Instruct everyone to pretend like they are frozen, closing their eyes and holding really still.

- Tell your shoulder partner how you feel after freezing. Now let’s see if we can feel like our middle cup again - have students sit/stand up 3 times, getting back in their bodies. (building resilience and courage)

Closing:

If time permits, you can cut out the scenarios having a student volunteer read or answer each one. Read each of the scenarios and discuss how they would respond (frozen, calm, or overflowing) to each one. Normalize that not everyone might respond in the same way - sometimes when we are overwhelmed, we might overfill or we might freeze and that both are okay! We can always use our breath to get back to calm. Using strategies that work for us empowers us to help ourselves in the way we need to.

Before leaving, encourage students to remember what they did to get back to feeling like the calm emotional cup (3 deep breaths for hyperarousal/fight/flight, stand up/sit down for hypoarousal/ freeze).

Activity K-2: "Where Do I Feel It"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will be able to identify and soothe emotions through tuning in to body signals.	Resilience, perseverance, self-awareness	Supports safety in the body	Grades K–2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness, Self-Management American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SMS 6. Ability to identify and overcome barriers ASCA B-SMS 2. Self-discipline and self-control ASCA B-SMS 7. Effective coping skills ASCA B-SMS 9. Personal safety skills	Students will be able to identify emotions in their body and coping strategies to help soothe those emotions.	My Body Sends a Signal: Helping Kids Recognise Emotions and Express Feelings by Natalia Maguire "Where do I feel it in my body?" worksheet - https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_vucc0L0-Nb7YKafYgYBEdgH47oqmN9p/view?usp=sharing Videos Rainbow breathing - https://www.gonoodle.com/videos/0YZV0Y/rainbow-breath Star breathing - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0DuxCmY2KQ Whale breathing - https://www.gonoodle.com/videos/ywe97w/whale-breath Five things - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsKpumL-ohQ Stomp stomp blow - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wyMmlaNRINA Butterfly hug - https://www.youtube.com/shorts/IFmfW6-Kje0 Tapping - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oumJZkmE6Ds Butterfly hug - https://www.youtube.com/shorts/IFmfW6-Kje0	Individual Activity Small Groups (4-6 students) Whole Group

Steps:

1 - Hook

Read the book "My Body Sends a Signal: Helping Kids Recognise Emotions and Express Feelings" by Natalia Maguire

2 - Explain the concept:

- Discuss how we can feel emotions in our body
- Explain that being able to understand our emotions can also help us know how to soothe ourselves.

3 - Practice Feeling:

- Use the "Where do I feel it in my body?" worksheet - https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_vucc0L0-Nb7YKafYgYBEdgH47oqmN9p/view?usp=sharing
- Have kids imagine a time they felt different emotions and use different colors to shade where they feel it in their body, fostering self-awareness.

- Have them shade lighter for when an emotion they feel is smaller in their body, vs. darker when an emotion they feel is bigger in the body.
- For example, they may feel a small bit of frustration when they can't find their sock and they may feel a BIG ANGER when someone breaks their toy.
- Bigger and smaller will vary based on the individual student's perception of that emotion for them.

4 - Coping Centers:

- Remind students that when we feel emotions it can sometimes be helpful to know how to soothe - or calm - our emotions.
- Split students up to explore different coping strategies in each center. They can watch all the videos or can select one for each group and have them share with each other later.

Breathing

Rainbow breathing - https://www.gonoodle.com/videos/0YZV0Y/rainbow-breath
Star breathing - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0DuxCmY2KQ
Whale breathing - https://www.gonoodle.com/videos/ywe97w/whale-breath

Sensory

Five things - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsKpumL-ohQ
Stomp stomp blow - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wyMmlaNRINA
Butterfly hug - https://www.youtube.com/shorts/IFmfW6-Kje0

Tapping

Tapping - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oumJZkmE6Ds
Butterfly hug - https://www.youtube.com/shorts/IFmfW6-Kje0

5 - Share out:

Encourage students to think about how the feeling changes in their bodies when these strategies are used, which helps them foster resilience and perseverance.
Have a few kids share what they noticed to reinforce options for soothing.

Closing:

Have students return to worksheet and list a favorite thing to use to help them soothe emotions
Discuss together what students noticed about emotions in the body, especially when using coping strategies.

Extension:

Have student report on coping skills in morning meeting or discussions
Discuss how it feels in their body to use a coping skill
Use coping skills routinely when transitioning or trying to calm during the day

Activity K-3: "I-Message Puppets"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will be able to use an I-message to help people around them understand their feelings and needs.	Perseverance, Courage	Supports safety in the body and empowerment to help self	Grades K–3
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SMS 1. Responsibility for self and actions ASCA B-SMS 6. Ability to identify and overcome barriers ASCA B-SMS 7. Effective coping skills ASCA B-SS 2. Positive, respectful and supportive relationships with students who are similar to and different from them	Students will be able to use an I-message to help people around them understand their feelings and needs.	"The Peace Rose" by Alicia Olson I-Message Template - https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RVbDCMTDlRPd3quEZgRKGYVNqeA8vuhV/view?usp=sharing Puppets for each student I-Message Scenarios - https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xewwNQDf176xQ4X5_dvnEPWr5shbSJIVfkOpTn9h840/edit?usp=sharing	Individual Activity Small Groups Whole Group

Steps:

1 - Hook

Read the book "The Peace Rose" by Alicia Olson

2 - Discussion

- What did you notice about how they talked to each when they used the Peace Rose?
- How did the Peace Rose help the students?

3 - Explain the concept:

- The kids in this book taught us something REALLY important about being able to solve problems with words.
- They used a special strategy called an "I-Statement."

An I-Statement is a special way that helps us have courage and to talk about problems.
It can help people feel more calm when there is a problem to be solved and can help us talk kindly to others when there is a problem so we can find a solution.

- Show the students the "I-Statement" template.
- Teach them the components of an I-Statement using the template.

4 - Practice the concept:

- Tell students they are each going to get puppets to help them practice this. Explain that you know this may be difficult but you believe working together and using I-statements can help them be brave and persevere when it feels tough.
- Give each student a puppet. Have students pair up. Give each pair a scenario.
- Have students use the scenario to come up with an I-statement together. Then, have them act out the scenario and the I-statement with their puppets.

Closing:

Have different pairs come to the front of the class to show their scenario and their puppet's I-statement to identify if students were able to use an i-statement.

Extension:

Practice using I-statements at school in conflict situations. Post the template and continue discussions around when and how students are using this strategy.
Send home the I-statement template with parents and a note about using it at home. Invite parents to email or report on a student's use of the I-Statement to highlight in class.
Put I-statement visuals in high conflict areas, such as in toy centers, out at recess and in the cafeteria for students to reference.
Model the use of I-statements in play, teaching, and interactions with students.

Handouts:

I-Message Template -https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RVbDCMTDlRPd3quEZgRKGYVNqeA8vuhV/view?usp=sharing

I-Message Scenarios - https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xewwNQDf176xQ4X5_dvnEPWr5shbSJIVfkOpTn9h840/edit?usp=sharing

Activity K-5: "Circles of Control"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will be able to complete a circle of control activity and identify at least 2 aspects of their lives they have influence over.	Responsibility, Courage, Self-awareness	Supports choice and empowerment with personal decisions, transparency in understanding the context around them, as well as a sense of safety by identifying things they have influence over	Grades K–5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness, Self-Management, Social Awareness, Responsible Decision-Making, Relationship Skills American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-LS 1. Critical thinking skills to make informed decisions ASCA B-SMS 1. Responsibility for self and actions ASCA B-SMS 6. Ability to identify and overcome barriers ASCA B-SMS 2. Self-discipline and self-control ASCA B-SMS 7. Effective coping skills ASCA B-SS 2. Positive, respectful and supportive relationships with students who are similar to and different from them	Students will be able to complete a circle of control activity and identify at least 2 aspects of their lives they have influence over.	"The Good Egg" by Jory John and Pete Oswald "My Circles of Control" worksheet - https://drive.google.com/file/d/1x5z0ivypEeh50qjLn5I-sRqpICBsJcHE/view?usp=sharing	Individual Activity Small Groups Whole Group

Steps:

1 - Hook
- Read the book "The Good Egg" by Jory John and Pete Oswald

2 - Discussion
- What feelings did you see the Good Egg had?
  - Exhausted
  - "Head felt scrambled"
  - Cracking up
  - Stressed
- Why was he feeling some of these feelings?
  - Tried to make everyone be a certain way
  - Tried to take care of everyone else
- What helped him?
  - Taking time alone for himself
  - Focusing on what he needed
  - Breathing
  - Painting
  - Journaling

3 - Explain the concept:
- -Discuss how sometimes we try to control things that are not ours to control or take responsibility for things that aren't our responsibility
  - Feelings of others
  - Jobs of others
  - Behaviors of others
- - If we try to control things that are not ours to control, we will feel stressed and anxious.
- - We need to find out what is our responsibility and what we need to let other people control on their own.
- - Things generally in your control
  - Your own thoughts or feelings
  - Your own reactions
  - Your own actions
  - Your own opinions
  - Your effort
  - Taking care of yourself or your things
  - Asking for help
- - Things generally not in your control
  - What other people thing, feel or do
  - Things that happen like the weather
  - The past - things that have already happened
  - What other people believe
  - How much effort other people use
  - If people respond how you want
  - What others think about you

4 - Circles of Control
- - Use the "Circles of Control" worksheet on a smart board or create a larger version on the white board or easel paper.
- - You might start by doing a circle of control with The Good Egg (what could the good egg control/not control?). If limited time, move right to what students notice about themselves.
- - Have students identify what kinds of things they can control
- - You may want to pick an area to examine that is meaningful to your group of students, such as:
  - What is in my control at recess?
  - What is in my control at centers?
  - What is in my control during specials?
  - What is in my control during free play?
- - Together, place what they can control in the middle circle and identify what is out of their control (or is the responsibility of someone else) in the outer circle.
- - Highlight how important and courageous asking for help can be when something that is out of their control is unsafe or inappropriate.
- - They may not be able to control other people's behaviors, but they can get an adult to help where needed.

5 - My Circle of Control:
- - Have students fill out their own circle of control. You may want to allow them to choose the contexts in which they want to do the circle of control for or you may assign it based on your understanding of the child's contextual factor or appropriateness of the setting (group, small group or individual).
- - Examples could be:
  - At school
  - At recess
  - At home
  - At my sports/music practice
  - At afterschool care
  - On the bus
  - When playing with my best friend
  - When having a problem with my sibling
  - When my parents fight

Closing:

Have students pair and share or share out with the whole class what they discovered.
Possibly have other students add ideas or suggestions
Discuss together what students noticed about their circle of control

Extension:

- It is recommended to follow this lesson up with a mindfulness or coping skills lesson for students to have tools to better handle not being able to control things. That lesson could tie back to the feelings we have when we can't control something
- You may use it throughout the day as you prepare for activities where students sometimes have conflicts (i.e. recess, at specials, on the bus, etc.) as a way to focus on their own responsibilities. Again, highlight the importance of asking for help when things are out of their control but should be stopped or changed with an adult.

Handouts:

"My Circles of Control" worksheet - https://drive.google.com/file/d/1x5z0ivypEeh50qjLn5I-sRqpICBsJcHE/view?usp=sharing

Activity K-5: "Name It To Tame It"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will be able to identify why it's important to name emotions and practice naming emotions.	Resilience, Perseverance, Courage	Supports safety in the body and empowerment to help self	Grades K–5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness, Self-Management American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SMS 2. Self-discipline and self-control ASCA B-SMS 7. Effective coping skills	Students will be able to identify why it's important to name emotions and practice naming emotions through a role play activity.	A Feelings book appropriate to developmental level, examples include: "The Boy with Big, Big Feelings" by Liz Johnson "A Little Spot of Feelings: Emotion Detective" by Diane Alber "The Way I Feel" by Janan Cain "I Can Handle It" by Laurie Wright "In My Heart: A Book of Feelings" by Jo Witek "My Many Colored Days" by Dr Seuss "There Are No Animals in This Book (Only Feelings)" by Chani Sanchez Chart paper or white board Feelings Wheel Younger students with pictures: https://www.brainframe-kids.com/emotions/printables/b-emotion-wheel-pictures.htm Younger students with words: https://www.brainframe-kids.com/emotions/printables/b-emotion-wheel-younger.htm Older students: https://www.brainframe-kids.com/emotions/printables/b-emotion-wheel-older.htm Name it to Tame it Scenarios - https://docs.google.com/document/d/1gkzNAbx6Zaa9BkytdgdVmstuHH7Vu-3g4T7oF7VqucU/edit?usp=sharing	Individual Activity Small Groups (4-6 students) Whole Group

Steps:

1 - Hook

- Read a book about emotions that children might feel. Some possibilities are
  - "The Boy with Big, Big Feelings" by Liz Johnson
  - "A Little Spot of Feelings: Emotion Detective" by Diane Alber
  - "The Way I Feel" by Janan Cain
  - "I Can Handle It" by Laurie Wright
  - "In My Heart: A Book of Feelings" by Jo Witek
  - "My Many Colored Days" by Dr Seuss
  - "There Are No Animals in This Book (Only Feelings)" by Chani Sanchez

2 - Explain the concept:

- Using chart paper or a white board, ask the children "Why is it important to be able to identify, or name, our feelings?"
- Take answers from students and write them on the board.
- Explain that when we are able to name an emotion that we are feeling, our thinking brain sends signals to our feeling brain to help calm down.

- Being able to understand our emotions can also help us know how to soothe ourselves, building resilience and perseverance.
- We call this "Name it to Tame it!" We name the emotion to help tame it when it feels out of control.

3 - Feelings Wheel:
- Use a Feelings Wheel appropriate to the age/classroom (BrainFrame Psychology for Kids, 2025). Some options are:
- Younger students with pictures: https://www.brainframe-kids.com/emotions/printables/b-emotion-wheel-pictures.htm
  Younger students with words: https://www.brainframe-kids.com/emotions/printables/b-emotion-wheel-younger.htm
  Older students: https://www.brainframe-kids.com/emotions/printables/b-emotion-wheel-older.htm
- Guide the students through coloring the feelings wheel (emotion family by emotion family) while exploring the different emotions together.
- Discuss together how each emotion might feel in the body, what situations may trigger an emotion, and what the emotion might be telling them they need.

4 - Role Playing:
- Have students break out into pairs or small groups. (If individual, go through the scenarios with the student and act out together).
- Give each group a scenario.
- Have them identify the emotion appropriate to the scenario using the feelings wheel.
- Have them act out the scenario, including naming the emotion. (building courage in sharing and being a self-advocate)
- Then, have them come up with one idea for helping themselves when they feel that emotion. (building resilience and perseverance)

5 - Share out:
Have groups share their scenarios/role plays.

Closing:

- Return to the board question "Why is it important to be able to identify, or name, our feelings?"
- Have students review, change, add or adjust the responses based on what they now know.
- Have students write on an exit ticket or state to a teacher or their neighbor why it's important to name emotions.

Extension:
- Randomly stop throughout the day and have the students name the emotion they are having.
- During read-alouds, have students identify the emotions of the characters.
- Have students reflect on emotions they had the day before during bell work.

Handouts:

Feelings Wheel
Younger students with pictures: https://www.brainframe-kids.com/emotions/printables/b-emotion-wheel-pictures.htm

Younger students with words: https://www.brainframe-kids.com/emotions/printables/b-emotion-wheel-younger.htm

Older students: https://www.brainframe-kids.com/emotions/printables/b-emotion-wheel-older.htm

Name it to Tame it Scenarios - https://docs.google.com/document/d/1gkzNAbx6Zaa9BkytdgdVmstuHH7Vu-3g4T7oF7VqucU/edit?usp=sharing

Activity K-5: "Feelings Phones"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will increase their negative affect tolerance by practicing discussing difficult feelings in small batches or chunks.	Resilience, Perseverance, Courage	Supports safety in the body and empowerment to help self	Grades K–5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL Competency: Self-Awareness, Self-Management American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SMS 1. Responsibility for self and actions ASCA B-SMS 7. Effective coping skills	Students will increase their negative affect tolerance by practicing discussing difficult feelings in small batches or chunks.	A play phone students can use and push buttons with Feelings thermometer (OCMH, n.d.) - https://children.wi.gov/Pages/EarlyChildhoodFeelingsThermometer.aspx Printable rewards chart https://www.freeprintablebehaviorcharts.com/ https://www.rewardcharts4kids.com/reward-charts-for-kids/ https://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/free-printable-charts-for-kids-daily-routines-behaviour-chores-goals-and-more/	Individual Activity

Steps:

1 - Hook
- Show the student a phone. Ask "what buttons are on a phone?
- Have students respond and focus on the hang up button. What does this button do?

2 - Explain the concept:
- Sometimes talking about hard things can feel really hard. Knowing we have control to stop when we need to can let us practice talking about hard things and building our emotional muscles so we can better handle talking about hard things when we need to.

3 - Practice the concept:
- Work with the student to pick a feeling to talk about. Try to choose a feeling state that is less overwhelming for the child, but still hard. For example, you may choose "boredom" rather than "fear" to help the child talk about something more negative, but not yet overwhelming.
- Using a phone, practice talking about the feeling. Using a thermometer visual, tell the student to show where they are on the thermometer as they are discussing the feeling. When it gets to the top of the thermometer, hang up the phone! At this point, the student and teacher can use a coping skill or other conversation to help the student return to positive conversation.
- Note: for students that have a hard time with this, maybe start with using puppets who talk about feelings until they are ready to try it themselves."
- Tell the student that our goal is to be able to feel more and more courageous/ able to talk about uncomfortable feelings because this will help us be able to solve problems without our feelings getting too big. We will build our feelings muscles so we can talk about all the things we need to.

Closing:

Have a reward chart for practice times with the phone that the student can use to motivate them toward building their feeling muscles. Every time the student uses the feelings phone, they can mark off one practice until they reach the end, this helps students build resilience and perseverance.

Extension:
Continue practicing this and implementing it in classrooms, homes, and other settings where appropriate for that child's context.
Pair this with other coping skills and emotional education to support negative affect tolerance.

Handouts:

Feelings thermometer (OCMH, n.d.) - https://children.wi.gov/Pages/EarlyChildhoodFeelingsThermometer.aspx

Printable rewards chart
https://www.freeprintablebehaviorcharts.com/

https://www.rewardcharts4kids.com/reward-charts-for-kids/

https://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/free-printable-charts-for-kids-daily-routines-behaviour-chores-goals-and-more/




Activity 9-12: "Snapshot: Survival Responses"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will learn about the brain's survival responses when experiencing a traumatic event. Students will explore the ways these responses may impact trauma survivors long after the adverse event occurs.	Empathy, understanding, respect, and care	Relational safety with structured group sharing, rituals of belonging, and peer empathy. The teacher will be mindful of examples of trauma responses to ensure emotional distance for every student and avoid personal triggers.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 3: Social Awareness	Teacher observation of class discussions and student participation. Deliverable from each student: Pre/Post "5 senses" observations.	Printed 5 senses handout for students (2 per student for pre/post observation) Picture to project during pre/post-snapshot assessment, song pre-chosen and cued up, and diffuser/scent ready to spray Article printed or link ready student reading https://neurolaunch.com/amygdala-and-trauma/	Could also be used for PD to support teacher understanding of PTSD responses

Steps:

1. PREPARATION:
   - Give each student two copies of the pre- and post-snapshot observations (5 senses) handout.
   - During the activity, you will be asking students to tap into their senses. In an effort to demonstrate the amygdala's job when threatened, you will need to have the following ready:
     Auditory: Choose a song to play during the pre and post-snapshot observations.
     Olfactory: Be prepared to turn on a diffuser with essential oils, spray something with a noticeable scent.
     Visual: Choose a picture to project during the pre and post snapshot observations.
   - Have the article ready for students to read on their devices or a printed copy for each student: https://neurolaunch.com/amygdala-and-trauma/

2. BEGIN THE LESSON:
   - Read today's objective out loud with students. Instruct them to use their pre-test handout to record their thoughts and experience. Challenge them to REALLY notice all of their senses and capture as much detail as possible.
   - Set a timer for 30 seconds.
   - Project your chosen visual, spray/turn on the diffuser, and put music on in the background at a slow volume.
   - Tell students they will have 30 seconds to take in as much sensory input as possible, recording their observations on their handout.
   - Start the timer once all sensory input is available, stopping it once the 30 seconds is over. TURN OFF music, diffuser, and visual projection.
   - Set a timer for 5 min.

3. REPEAT the same steps (with the same sensory input) on the post 5 senses worksheet, this time, allow students a longer time to record their observations on their 5 senses handout.

4. Whole Group or Small Group Discussion:
   - Have students compare their notes on what they were able to pick up the first time vs. when they had a longer time to make their observations.
   - Include the following questions in your discussion:
     How much more were you able to pick up when you were given more time?
     Were there obvious things you missed the first time that stood out clearly with more time?
     Does it seem one sense was more heightened than the rest for you?
     How might this relate to someone who has experienced a traumatic event? (you can relate this to having empathy for others who have experienced a traumatic event)
   - Let students know that the AMYGDALA, or the "emotional brain," has the role of gathering this sensory information during a traumatic event in an effort to prepare the body to respond. It becomes HYPERVIGILANT to stimuli and begins rapidly encoding all environmental/sensory information at the time of the event. Relate this to your activity. What you

gathered in 5 min you could have gathered in 30 seconds if there was a threat in your environment.

BE MINDFUL to use examples that have no chance of being part of their own personal experience to provide students with emotional safety in discussion.

EXAMPLE of Traumatic Event: If an angry tiger ran into the classroom, each of your amygdalas would GET TO WORK protecting you, heightening your senses. Once the tiger left, you may be able to recall the size, smell, color, and sound of the students around you in great detail, while you might be missing other key details.
This could then create a heightened emotional response around similar stimuli even when your mind/body is safe.

EXAMPLE of Hypervigilance: Seeing anything with a striped pattern could cause a heightened response, even if you are perfectly safe. This is the experience many people with PTSD have.
Explain that this activity shows how important it is to have empathy, understanding, respect, and care for others who may have heightened responses and to be mindful of how to support them (or ourselves).

Closing:

If time permits, students can read the following article, which explains the brain's responses during trauma:
https://neurolaunch.com/amygdala-and-trauma
Encourage students to answer the following reflection questions with an emphasis on using an empathetic lens:
Knowing what you've learned about hypervigilance, how might this show up for someone who has experienced trauma?
In their relationships?
In their daily living?
In their work or school?

Handouts:

5 Senses Handout (2 copies for each student):
https://www.eltbuzz.com/video/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Use-Your-5-Senses.pdf

Choose an Image to project (same photo for pre-post observations):
Busy City Street

Vibrant Day at An Amusement Park

Busy Grocery Store

Activity 9-12: "Window of Tolerance"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will learn about their own window of tolerance, practice self reflection, and learn new ways to self regulate.	Self-Reflection, Empowerment, Empathy	Building autonomy through student choice (closing activity), safe and collaborative peer sharing.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competencies: Self Awareness Self Management Social Awareness	Teacher observation of student participation and discussion. Student Deliverable: Window of Tolerance Checklist	Window of Tolerance Explained (to project during whole group discussion) Window of Tolerance Checklist (printed worksheet for each student) Digital access to article: Understanding the Window of Tolerance and How it Affects You Computers/student devices	Group

Steps:

1. Whole Group Discussion:
   - Read today's objective aloud and ask students to reflect: We all have different emotional triggers that cause us to respond in certain ways.
   - What are some coping skills, activities, or healthy distractions you engage in when you are feeling upset?
   - Gather some whole group responses. Today we will be learning about The Window of Tolerance and How it Affects You.

2. Individual Reading:
   - Provide students the link to the article on Window of Tolerance. Encourage them to read individually knowing that they will be discussing their knowledge of the following terms after they complete the reading (write these on the board):
     Window of Tolerance
     Emotional Stimuli
     Dysregulation
     Hyperarousal
     Hypoarousal

3. Whole Group Discussion:
   - Once students have read the article, facilitate whole group discussion and fill in the definitions as a whole class to the words on the board.
   - Normalize that EVERYONE has a window of tolerance and that we slip and out of that window many times a day depending on what emotional stimuli come our way.
   - To encourage looking through an empathetic lens, ask the following questions:
     * What did you learn about the impact of trauma on someone's window of tolerance?
     * How might this impact the way you see other's behavioral responses?
   - Encouraging students to empathize that you never know how emotional stimuli might impact one person vs. another.

4. Individual:
   - The more we know about our own window of tolerance, the more likely we are able to widen the window!
   - Use this as an opportunity to reflect on ways you respond when triggered.
   - Provide students with the Window of Tolerance Checklist to complete on their own.

Closing:

To close, empower students that there are MANY ways to help yourself get back in your window. One of them being mindfulness, grounding, healthy distractions, or breathing.
Give students a choice on if they would like to learn a grounding skill or breathing technique. Walk through the grounding/breathing technique as a class.

- Grounding Technique: Have students name 5 things they see, 4 things they can touch, 3 things they hear, 2 things they smell, and 1 thing they can taste.
Have students share what they notice about pre-post grounding technique and how this may support them in getting back in their window when distressed.

- Breathing Technique: Teach students 4-7-8 breathing. INHALE (4 sec), HOLD (7 sec), EXHALE (8 sec).
Have students share what they notice about pre-post breathing techniques and how this may support them in getting back in their window when distressed.

If time permits, encourage students to write down a list of healthy coping skills/distractions that keep them in their window on the back of their handout.

Handouts:

Window of Tolerance Explained (to project during whole group discussion)

Window of Tolerance Checklist (printed worksheet for each student)

Digital access to article: Understanding the Window of Tolerance and How it Affects You

Sexual Abuse

VS Case Study - Sexual Abuse:

A quiet middle school girl revealed to a trusted Victory staff member that she was being abused by her uncle. She hadn't told anyone else — not family, not law enforcement — because she didn't trust anyone outside of school. What gave her the courage was the consistent, caring relationships we had built and the daily reinforcement of Respect, Courage, and Integrity through lessons and assemblies. Our team immediately activated supports, connected her with services, and ensured she was safe. With ongoing mentoring, counseling, and the protective net of trusted adults at school, she not only found healing but grew into a student leader, later sharing at an assembly that, "School was the first place I ever felt safe."

Sexual abuse is when a child is coerced or tricked into any kind of sexual contact or activity, and can be contact or no contact (CDC, 2024; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019; National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, n.d.). Contact sexual abuse can include touching over or underneath clothing, using a body part or object to penetrate, asking a child to undress, touch someone else, or participate in prostitution (CDC, 2024; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019; National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, n.d.). Non-contact sexual abuse can include exposure or flashing by adult, exposure to pornography, exposure to sexual acts, making and/or sharing pornographic content, and sexual activity over the phone or online (CDC, 2024; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019; National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, n.d.).

It is very typical for this issue to be greatly under-reported, as many children do not understand they are being abused, they are afraid of their abuser, or the abuser has normalized the behavior towards the child; abusers will leverage their relationship with the child, utilizing guilt and fear for control (CDC, 2024; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019; National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, n.d.). Among reported sexual abuse cases, national statistics for 2024 showed that 21.7% of children in the United States had experienced sexual abuse, and 90% was perpetrated by someone known to the child (Finkelhor et al., 2024). Children who have experienced sexual abuse may exhibit sudden discomfort while walking or sitting, physical damage to genital area (although this is surprisingly rare), regression in emotions and toileting behaviors, new fears and reactivity to touch, concentration issues, hygiene issues, somatization of emotions through stomach aches and head aches, sexual knowledge or behavior that is above their developmental level, self-injurious behaviors, changes in eating, sleeping, or loss of interest in their favorite activities (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019; Bravehearts, n.d.).

Effects on Children

Social Impact

Childhood sexual abuse contributes to both short-term and long-term problems with socialization and developing protective social connections (Blanchard-Dallaire & Hebert, 2014; CDC, 2024; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019; National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, n.d.). In the long-term, studies have demonstrated consistently that adults who experienced childhood sexual abuse struggle with negative outcomes across all domains, but especially in accessing protective social resources such as education, employment, and mental health supports (CDC, n.d.). In the short-term, these children struggle with making important peer connections, which shows up as difficulty with interactions and showing positive emotions, causing frequent rejection from peers (Blanchard-Dallair & Hebert, 2014).

A lower level of social competence can easily lead to peer rejection, which can be a compounding isolating factor for a child who has experienced grooming alongside sexual abuse. Grooming is unique to childhood sexual abuse. It is a process where an abuser will build trust with a potential victim with the intent of creating compliance and isolation (Bravehearts, n.d.; Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 2023). Grooming often occurs within family groups, as the abuser builds trust within families, with caregivers, and within organizations, teams, clubs, and agencies (Bravehearts, n.d.; Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 2023). The goal of the abuser is to build enough trust that they can access the child with no oversight or interference from other adults, and abusers are sometimes willing to take years to build these relationships (Bravehearts, n.d.; Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 2023). It is important to remember that 90% of reported abuse is an offender who is known to the victim (Finkelhor et al., 2024). Successful grooming can erode trust in social support networks, by increasing social isolation, and causing fear of loss or harm to a victim's family or other close support networks (Bravehearts, n.d.; Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 2023).

Grooming can look very similar to genuinely healthy and caring behaviors, especially in the early stages. However, an abuser will show early signs of leveraging trust with a child, such as encouraging activities that do not include other adults, like overnight stays, trips out with the child, tutoring, coaching, or free babysitting (Bravehearts, n.d.; Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 2023). Abusers may portray themselves as very charming and caring individuals, and can leverage themselves into positions where they will have access to children (Bravehearts, n.d.; Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 2023). Abusers will select their victims, and build trust with compliments, gifts, special activities, and other rewards such as allowing activities that the parents do not approve of (Bravehearts, n.d.; Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault, 2023). Caregivers can learn to identify these 'patterns of behavior' and help to establish safe boundaries for children.

Schools can support students experiencing trauma from childhood sexual abuse by working to rebuild trust and strengthen protective social connections. By intentionally cultivating supportive peer networks, teaching boundary-setting, and reinforcing virtues such as respect, integrity, and compassion, schools can help children regain confidence in social interactions while also countering the manipulation that grooming instills. In this way, schools serve as a protective factor, reducing isolation, rebuilding trust in healthy adult relationships, and supporting long-term healing. Creating consistent routines, safe physical spaces, and predictable classroom environments helps children regain a sense of control and security. Peer mentoring, cooperative learning groups, and structured opportunities for positive peer interaction can reduce isolation and encourage relationship-building. Integrating social-emotional learning and character education allows students to practice empathy, respect, and conflict resolution while explicitly teaching boundary-setting and safe relationship skills. Schools can also provide trusted adults or "check-in" mentors who regularly support vulnerable students, as well as establish clear reporting protocols and family education sessions that help caregivers recognize grooming patterns. Furthermore, training staff to recognize trauma responses and avoid punitive discipline, instead using restorative practices and supportive interventions that affirm student dignity is critical. Together, these strategies equip children with protective skills, reduce the likelihood of peer rejection, and counteract the erosion of trust caused by grooming and abuse.

Emotional Impact

Childhood sexual abuse can lead to insecure attachment styles and attachment disorders (Attachment & Trauma Network, n.d.). Sexual abuse in particular can lead to a disorganized, or fearful, attachment style, which is characterized by difficulty expressing emotions (disassociation), difficulty making and maintaining friendships, struggles with trust, and difficulty with emotional regulation (Attachment & Trauma Network, n.d.; Turner et al., 2019). These children struggle between wanting to connect and a deep fear of connection, and can appear to peers as withdrawn and hostile (Turner et al., 2019).

Schools can mitigate the emotional effects of childhood sexual abuse by intentionally fostering trauma-informed and character-centered environments that prioritize safety, trust, and healthy relationship-building. Using predictable routines, and responding to challenging behaviors with empathy rather than punishment helps students feel secure and understood. Providing access to school counselors, social-emotional learning, and safe spaces allows students to process emotions and build regulation skills. Character development practices, such as teaching empathy, respect, and fairness, can normalize supportive peer interactions and provide models of trustworthy relationships. Mentorship programs and structured opportunities for cooperative learning can further help students practice forming healthy attachments in low-risk contexts. Together, these strategies create consistent experiences of safety and connection, which can counteract the isolation, mistrust, and fear that often accompany disorganized attachment.

Physical Impact

Childhood sexual abuse impacts both short-term and long-term physical health of victims. According to a summary of existing data by Fisher et al. (2017), there are immediate causes of physical damage, such as injury to anal/genital area, sexually transmitted infection, early development of puberty, urinary issues, and psychosomatic issues such as headaches and stomachaches. The same summary found long-term physical impacts as well, which aligned with findings from the CDC on Adverse Childhood Experiences (CDC, n.d.). Long-term effects that have been associated with childhood sexual abuse are ongoing neurological problems such as headaches and unexplained seizures, cardiopulmonary diseases, liver and digestive system problems, reproductive issues and difficulty with childbirth, higher body mass index, and immune system problems (Fisher et al., 2017).

Schools should prioritize safety, stability, and holistic well-being. A trauma-informed approach ensures that educators recognize physical symptoms such as headaches, stomachaches, or fatigue as potential trauma responses instead of as misbehavior or lack of effort, leading to more compassionate responses like flexible attendance policies, rest areas, and access to school nurses or counselors. Schools can also build strong partnerships with healthcare providers and create clear referral systems to support students with ongoing medical needs. At the same time, embedding character development practices such as teaching resilience, self-regulation, empathy, and trust fosters a safe and respectful environment where students feel valued and connected. Practical strategies include offering mindfulness exercises to reduce stress, creating peer support groups, ensuring predictable routines, and training staff to model patience and respect. By combining trauma-informed care with intentional character formation, schools not only address immediate physical challenges but also strengthen students' long-term capacity to heal, thrive, and build healthy identities.

Cognitive Impact

Sexual abuse is unique to other forms of abuse, in that it carries a particular set of dynamics that cause significant structural and functional changes to several areas of cognition (Finkelhor & Browne, 1995). Children who experience sexual abuse suffer from the 'traumagenic' factors of traumatic sexualization, betrayal, powerlessness, and stigmatization (Finkelhor & Browne, 1995). As a consequence of these factors, multiple studies have found that people who have experienced this form of abuse experience cognitive delays in areas of executive functioning (Amedee et al., 2024; Finkelhor & Browne, 1995). Particularly impacted among survivors are short-term verbal memory, math skills, flexibility, and inhibitory function (Amedee et al., 2024; Finkelhor & Browne, 1995).

Providing predictable routines, calm learning environments, and the use of restorative rather than punitive discipline can reduce triggers linked to betrayal, powerlessness, and stigmatization. Targeted academic supports like scaffolding tasks, using visual aids, breaking down math concepts, and offering memory supports directly address delays in executive functioning, verbal memory, and flexibility. Pairing these with social-emotional learning and character development practices, such as teaching self-regulation, empathy, and perseverance through explicit modeling and reflection, supports both cognitive and moral growth. Importantly, cultivating caring teacher-student relationships and peer cultures rooted in dignity and respect helps restore a sense of agency and belonging, counteracting the isolation and mistrust that survivors often experience.

Where to Get Additional Support

SACRED (Sexually Abused Children's Relief Endeavor): Provides financial assistance to families of sexually abused children for necessities so they can focus on healing without financial crisis. https://kidsaresacred.org/

Survivors of Childhood Sex Abuse (SCSA): Advocacy, peer support, free resources to victims/survivors. https://www.scsaorg.org/

The Child Welfare Information Gateway, What is Child Abuse and Neglect? Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms: https://www.childwelfare.gov/resources/what-child-abuse-and-neglect-recognizing-signs-and-symptoms/

The 6 Stages of Grooming Fact Sheet The 6 Stages of Grooming

National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC): Online and hotline resources for child victimization and exploitation, assistance in finding help. https://www.dhs.gov/know2protect

KCSARC (King County Sexual Assault Resource Center): Offers resources and family services, support groups for non-offending parents and caregivers, education on trauma, walking-together groups, etc. https://www.kcsarc.org/en/

National Sexual Violence Resource Center: information and resources https://www.nsvrc.org/

Child Abuse Helplines / Crisis Hotline: + Various hotlines, e.g. the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline, etc. These are 24/7, confidentially, can help with crisis response, referrals. https://headstart.gov/

Activity K-2: "My Safety Network"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will be able to identify adults in their lives that they can find support and connection with to help with coping, co-regulation, and a sense of safety.	Courage, Self-awareness, Friendship	Builds social safety, coping strategies, and helps provide trusting connections	Grades K–2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning FRAMEWORK CASEL Competency: Social Awareness, Relationship Skills American School Counselor Association Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success ASCA B-SS 3: Positive relationships with adults to support success.	Students will be able to identify 3 safe adults. Students will be able to show or describe what the identified adult does to help the student feel safe.	White board/Chalk board/Easel paper Paper and drawing supplies (markers, colored pencils, etc.) Optional: "My Safety Network" by Jayneen Sanders	Individual Activity Small Group (4-6 students) Whole Group Lesson

Steps:

1 - Hook
- "Who are people that can help us?"
- Students may respond with teachers, parents, friends, neighbors, fire fighters, doctors, etc.
- For younger children, you might read "My Safety Network" by Jayneen Sanders

2 - Explain the concept:
- "Safe adults are helpers who will help us to feel safe. We find our safe helpers to create a safety network to help us when we need it."
- Generate a list with the students of what safe adults might do to help someone feel safe:
  - Listen to you
  - Believe what you say
  - Respect your body and your boundaries
  - Help you get what you need
  - Protect you
- Add to the list what safe adults might say to help you feel safe:
  - "I'm right here with you"
  - "I'll take care of you"
  - "It's okay to have a big feeling"
  - "I believe in you"
  - "I will do everything I can do keep you safe"
  - "It's okay to ask questions"
- Discuss together who might be a safe adult and how they help the students feel safe:
  - Teacher
  - Family member (parent/grandparent)
  - Counselor
  - Neighbor
  - Doctor
  - Pastor
  - (At least one person outside of your family)
- Discussion prompts to help:
  - Are all adults safe?
  - Do all kids have the same safe adults?
  - Can a safe adult be a stranger?

3 - Have students engage in artwork to identify safe adults and safe adult behaviors.
- Ask students to draw/paint/sketch three safe adults and to write or show things that make those adults safe (for younger students, consider having them follow the format of the Safety Network book with their hand print)
- Students may share with the group or with the teacher
- Remind the students to find a safe adult if they ever needs help

Closing:

Have students thank one of their safe adults for being safe.

Extension: Have students write letters to a safe adult.

Activity 3-5: "My Body, My Boundaries!"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Students will learn empowering language to set assertive body boundaries. Students will practice setting body boundaries through role play. Students will identify 5 safe adults whom they can share with if their body boundaries are not adhered to.	Self-advocacy, empowerment, resilience, assertiveness	Using the teacher as a model, preparing student volunteers ahead of time to increase predictability and emotional safety. Structured demonstration, peer empathy, and safe peer community.	Grades 3-5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Competencies Self Awareness Self Management Social Awareness Relationship Skills	Teacher observation of student participation and discussion. Student deliverable: Traced hand with 5 safe adults identified.	Chalk with 4 different colors One student volunteer Blank sheet of paper and pencil for closing activity	Group

Steps:

1. PREPARATION FOR THE LESSON:
   - Students will be outside for this lesson in order to use the chalk and have enough space for the demonstration.
   - Prior to bringing your class outside, you can pre-draw 4 different colored circles (one within the other like a bullseye).
   - The inner circle should be wide enough to fit a standing student body.

   NOTE: Trauma best practice - pre-select a student volunteer and ask for their consent to be part of the demonstration well before starting the lesson (creating predictability). Ask them if they are comfortable giving you a high five. If yes (modeling consent), proceed to the lesson. If not, find a comfortable student volunteer.

2. BEGIN THE LESSON/HOOK (Whole Group):
   - Have students line up shoulder to shoulder by your pre-drawn circles so that every student can see the demonstration. The teacher will stand in the inner circle.
   - Once students are outside, ask them to get curious about today's lesson.
   - What do you think we will be doing today? Why am I standing in the middle of these circles? Encourage aloud sharing - silly responses are welcome!
   - Let students know that today we will be learning about body boundaries and consent.

3. BEGIN DEMONSTRATION:
   - Give students a working definition of "consent" and "boundaries" and have them echo you as you read them aloud:
     Consent - the act of agreeing or accepting something. Have them echo the definition.
     Boundaries - rules and limits individuals set to define acceptable behavior from others, protecting their physical and emotional well-being.
   - Say, "Since Mrs. Schumacher (insert your name) is in the circle, it is up to Mrs. Schumacher to practice consent or set a boundary. Let's empower her! On the count of three, you are going to say:
     'Mrs. Schumacher's Body, Mrs. Schumacher's Boundaries!'
     1.... 2.... 3....."
     In unison: "Mrs. Schumacher's Body, Mrs. Schumacher's Boundaries!"
   - Let students know you chose a student volunteer and ALREADY received his/her consent to be part of the demonstration.
   - Model boundaries/consent in three ways (model listening to your intuition/body feelings) - remind students you are just practicing and that although you feel comfortable high-fiving ALL your students, you are going to show examples of boundary setting too!
   - Consent - Share your inner dialogue outloud, model listening to your body:
     "I am comfortable with ___, he/she always listens to my boundaries and I feel safe around him/her. My body feels comfortable with that. I think I will give consent for ___ to give me a high five in my inner circle!! Have the student demonstrate slowly walking up to give the teacher a high five."
   - Body Boundary A (Teacher role plays boundary)
     Have the student go back to the outer circle. Have the student ask, "Can I come give you a high five?"
     Demonstrate discomfort in your body (crossing arms/closing off body, looking down).

Model an inner Dialogue: "I am not sure I am comfortable with that. I feel icky about letting them in my inner circle. My body tells me I would rather not. I will need to set a boundary. "No, thank you. Can you please give me some space?"
Students will adhere to the boundary respectfully - "No problem!" By setting my boundaries, I am showing self-respect and advocating for myself. That takes courage but I can do it!

- Body Boundary B (Student role plays boundary)
  - Have the student trade places with you in the inner circle.
  - Repeat steps, but encourage your student to set the boundary (modeling that it is okay to say no to an adult if your body boundaries don't feel safe (fostering self-advocacy, assertiveness and empowerment).
  - If time permits, choose a few more student volunteers to practice role playing. Start each role play with:
    "_____'s Body, _____'s Boundaries!" (fill in with the student's name who is in the inner circle)
    1.... 2.... 3.....
    In unison: "_____ Body, _____ Boundaries!"

Closing:

Have students come back to the classroom and begin a discussion on the demonstration. Ask students to share their thoughts, feelings, and observations. Be sure to highlight that consent went two ways and acknowledge how the person in the center listened to their minds and bodies to decide if they needed to set a body boundary.

Finally, instruct students to trace their hand on a blank piece of paper. Have them name 5 SAFE adults, filling in one name for every finger. Advise them that these are adults they can share with if they ever feel unsafe, uncomfortable, or if someone crosses their body boundaries without consent, including inappropriate touch.

REMIND students that body boundaries are a right of every person. Whether the person is a child or an adult.

Activity 4-8: “Dignity: Seeing Ourselves and Others”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
To introduce and personalize the concept of dignity—the special value of every human person—in a way that is developmentally appropriate and emotionally grounded. To foster a sense of shared safety, mutual respect, and classroom peace. To provide language and reflection tools for children to reclaim their sense of worth and agency, especially when they have experienced or witnessed harm.	Respect, Self-Worth, Kindness, Empathy	This activity reinforces predictability, safety, and student agency. It validates a child's experience without asking for disclosure and reinforces the core truth that being harmed does not lessen one's dignity. It creates space to reflect, reclaim, and reimagine safer relationships.	Grades 4-8
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 3: Social Awareness CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills	Student-generated illustrations or writing can be kept as artifacts of understanding Optional: Exit reflection or anchor chart on how to uphold dignity in the classroom	Dry-erase markers or personal whiteboards (or laminated paper with washable markers) Main classroom whiteboard or easel pad Post-it notes or scratch paper (optional for exit slips) A visible definition of Dignity Calm classroom tone or mindfulness opening (optional)	Whole-class discussion with options for independent or partner drawing work

Steps:

Facilitator's Note: Please be aware- this session may stir deep emotions for children, especially those who have experienced harm to their body, safety, or sense of worth. Before delivering this activity, please ensure you have gained approval or consultation from your school's counseling department and/or leadership team. Engaging in trauma-informed dialogue with children is meaningful work, and it must be done with safeguards in place, clear follow-up plans, and alignment with your school's broader wellness supports. After the session, consider checking in with your mental health team or school social worker to share any observations or to debrief supportively.

1. Write DIGNITY in large letters on the board. Do not define it yet.
   Give each student a whiteboard or desk space to write or draw their own understanding of “What does dignity mean to you?”

2. Allow quiet reflection—no right or wrong answers.
   Encourage expressive freedom (words, pictures, or symbols).

3. Invite volunteers to share aloud. Use prompts if needed:
   - What did you write or draw?
   - Why do you think dignity is important?
   - Have you ever seen someone show or not show dignity?

4. Reveal the definition of dignity:
   - Dignity is the special value of every human person.
   - Write it visibly on the board and read it aloud.

5. Facilitate turn and talk or small group discussion
   - What's the same or different between your definition and the one on the board?
   - Why do you think it's important to know that everyone has dignity—even if they've been hurt, or made mistakes?

6. Facilitate student contributions or offer direct teaching:
   - All people have dignity.
   - People who make bad choices still have dignity.
   - Even when you've been hurt, you still have dignity.
   - No one can take your dignity away—it's part of who you are.
   - We show dignity by the way we speak to and treat others.

7. Facilitate turn and talk or small group discussion
   - Do all human beings deserve respect?
   - Why is it important to remember that/ after someone has been hurt?

8. Optional Trauma-Aware Questions:
These may be offered verbally or as journaling prompts, depending on your context and student readiness.

   Have you ever felt hurt because someone didn't respect you?
   Why do you think people sometimes say or do hurtful things?
      They might be hurt themselves
      They might not know better
      They might think it makes them look strong or cool
   What could change if more people thought about dignity before they acted?
   Invite students to work independently or in pairs.

Prompt:

   Draw or write one way you can honor someone's dignity this week—at school, at home, or anywhere.
   Let students share ideas if they'd like, or display them as a visual wall of care (if appropriate in your space).

Closing:

Stamp: Even when people are hurt—or when they hurt others—they still have dignity. And so do you. Your story may have hard parts, but it doesn't change your worth. When we choose words, actions, and silence that honor dignity, we help our classroom become a safe and peaceful place for everyone.

Activity 9-12: "Strength Through Voice: Empowerment and Boundaries"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	**Character Traits Targeted:**	**Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:**	**Age Range:**
To help students reclaim a sense of agency, self-worth, and trust in their voice by exploring strengths, practicing boundary-setting, and affirming personal empowerment in a safe, supportive classroom environment.	Self- respect, courage, resilience, empathy, self-awareness, integrity	Safety: No pressure to disclose, right to pass, grounding activities. Empowerment: Focus on strengths, choice, and agency. Trust & Respect: Clear boundaries, confidentiality, affirmations. Connection: Shared wall of strength, collective affirmations.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 2: Self-Management CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills	1. Reflection Journal (Private) Prompt: "Which strength do I want to grow, and how can I practice it this week?" 2. Observation (Teacher) Checklist during group work: respectful listening, effort in identifying strengths, participation in boundary-setting practice (verbally or written). 3. Empowerment Wall Contributions (Class) Review anonymous phrases for themes of strength and resilience—evidence that students are internalizing empowerment.	Circle of chairs Journals or paper. "Character Strength Cards" (or a simple printed list of traits: courage, resilience, creativity, empathy, honesty, hope, etc.). Chart paper/markers. A calm, private, and respectful classroom environment.	Small group/whole class

Steps:

1. Grounding & Safety (5 minutes)
   - Begin with a calming activity (deep breaths, stretching, or a guided "safe space" visualization).
   - Establish norms: confidentiality, respect, right to pass, no pressure to share personal stories.
   Teacher note: Never ask students to disclose trauma history.

2. Strengths Discovery (10 minutes)
   - Provide each student with a list of character strengths (or cards).
   - Prompt: "Circle or highlight 3 strengths you already see in yourself. Now, add 1 strength you want to grow stronger."
   - Optional: students can decorate/write their chosen strengths in journals.

3. Character Trait Connection (5–7 minutes)
   - Introduce six key traits: integrity, self-respect, courage, self-awareness, empathy, and resilience. Offer quick, student-friendly definitions and examples:
     Integrity: Doing the right thing, even if no one is watching (like admitting a mistake).
     Self-respect: Treating yourself with dignity and not settling for less than you deserve (like setting healthy limits).
     Courage: Taking action even when it feels scary (like standing up for yourself).
     Self-awareness: Knowing your feelings and needs (like recognizing when you're stressed).
     Empathy: Understanding and caring about how others feel (like checking in on a friend).
     Resilience: Bouncing back after challenges (like trying again after a setback).
   - Reflection Prompt:
     Ask students: "Which of these traits feels most important to you right now? Why?" They can underline it on their list, add a small symbol/drawing in their journal, or share with a partner (sharing optional).

4. Practicing Boundaries (15 minutes).
   - The teacher introduces the idea of healthy boundaries: saying no, asking for space, expressing needs.
   - Provide role-play scenarios (non-triggering and everyday examples):
     Ex.: A friend pressuring you to share something personal.
     Ex.: A peer asking you to take on too much responsibility in a group project.
     Ex.: A classmate spreading gossip about you.
   - Students (in pairs or small groups) practice respectful responses:
     "No, I'm not comfortable with that."
     "I need some space right now."
     "Please don't share that about me."
   - (Choice: students can write responses if role-play feels too vulnerable.)

5. Empowerment Wall (10 minutes)
   - On sticky notes or slips of paper, students write an empowering phrase for themselves or for peers (e.g., "I am strong," "I deserve respect," "My voice matters.")
   - Collectively post on a classroom "Wall of Strength."
   - Students can keep their own note privately if preferred.

Closing:

1. Closing reflection: Go around the circle: each student shares one word of strength they are taking with them (e.g., courage, resilience, hope, self-respect).
   Teacher closes with an affirmation, such as: "Your voice matters. Your boundaries matter. You carry strength and courage inside you every day. You are worthy of safety, dignity, and respect."

2. Extension Activity: "Affirmation Letters to Self." Journaling Prompt (5–10 minutes)
   Students respond to: "What would I tell myself on a hard day to remind me of my strength and worth?" "What boundaries do I want to protect and honor for myself?"

3. Letter Writing (10–15 minutes)
   Students write a private letter to themselves, beginning with: "Dear [Name], I want you to remember…" Encourage positive affirmations: courage, self-respect, hope, resilience.
   Letters can remain private, sealed in an envelope, or stored in journals.

4. Optional Classroom Ritual (5 minutes)
   Provide decorated envelopes or slips of paper for students to seal their letters.
   Optionally, store them to return later in the semester as a reminder of growth.

Activity 9-12: "The Shield of Strength "

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
To help students externalize their inner strengths and protective strategies by creating a symbolic "shield." This emphasizes resilience, self-worth, and empowerment without requiring disclosure of trauma.	Resilience, hope, courage, self-respect, empathy	Safety (Physical & Emotional): The shield is a symbolic, creative activity that doesn't require disclosure of traumatic experiences. Students maintain choice in how much they share, reducing the risk of re-traumatization. Starting with grounding and ending with affirmation creates a safe emotional container. Trust & Transparency: The teacher clearly explains the purpose of the shield ("to reflect strengths, supports, and hopes") and sets predictable norms (confidentiality, right to pass, respect). Students know what to expect throughout the activity, which builds trust and minimizes anxiety. Empowerment, Voice, & Choice: Students design their shield their way—drawing, writing, or collaging. They choose what strengths, supports, or hopes to highlight and whether or not to share. Practicing boundary-setting within the shield reinforces their agency and control over their lives and bodies. Collaboration & Peer Support: Optional sharing fosters community connection without pressure. Listening respectfully to peers' shields builds empathy and validation, reducing feelings of isolation common for survivors. Cultural Responsiveness: The shield format can incorporate personal values, cultural identity, and symbols meaningful to each student. This affirms dignity and acknowledges that strength and healing look different across individuals and cultures. Resilience & Growth Orientation: Instead of centering the trauma, the activity highlights personal strengths, boundaries, and future hopes. This promotes post-traumatic growth—helping students see themselves as survivors with power and purpose, not just as victims.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 2: Self-Management CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills	1. Reflection Journal Prompt: "Which part of my shield will I lean on the most this week, and why?" 2. Observation: Engagement, effort in creating the shield, respect for others. 3. Artifact: Completed shield (kept private or displayed, depending on student choice).	Circle of chairs Large paper (shield outline template or blank). Markers, colored pencils, magazines for collage (optional). Tape or push pins for displaying (optional). A calm, private, and respectful classroom environment.	Small group/whole class

Steps:

1. Grounding & Safety (5 minutes)
    - Begin with a breathing or stretching exercise.
    - Review group agreements: confidentiality, right to pass, respect for all voices.

2. Introduction (5 minutes)
    - Teacher says: "A shield is something that protects us. Today, you'll create your own Shield of Strength to represent the qualities, people, and values that help protect and empower you."

3. Explicit Character Trait Connection (5 minutes)
    - Introduce four character traits—resilience, hope, courage, and self-awareness.
    - Provide student-friendly definitions and a quick example for each:
        Resilience: Bouncing back when life is tough (like trying again after a disappointment).
        Hope: Believing in a positive future (like setting goals even when things feel hard).
        Courage: Facing fears or challenges (like speaking up for yourself).
        Self-awareness: Understanding your feelings, needs, and values (like noticing when you need rest or support).
    - Invite students to reflect:
        Which of these traits has helped you recently? Which one would you like to grow stronger in?
    - They can jot down a word, draw a small symbol, or choose a color that represents their chosen trait. This can later be incorporated into their shield.

4. Design the Shield (20 minutes)
    - Students divide the shield into four sections (or more if desired):
        Personal Strengths – traits like courage, resilience, creativity, kindness.
        Supportive People/Community – friends, mentors, teachers, family, role models.
        Healthy Boundaries – ways they protect themselves (e.g., saying no, seeking safe spaces, choosing who to trust).
        Future Hopes & Goals – dreams, aspirations, or positive affirmations (e.g., "I will graduate," "I am worthy of love and respect").
    - (Students can draw, write, or collage. Sharing is optional.)

5. Optional Sharing Circle (10 minutes)
    - Students can share one part of their shield (if they feel comfortable).
    - Prompts: "What part of your shield feels strongest right now?" or "What symbol did you add that you're proud of?"

Closing:

1. Closing Reflection (5 minutes)
    Ask each student to choose one word from their shield to carry with them (courage, hope, respect, perseverance, etc.).
    Teacher affirms: "Your shield is a reminder that you carry strength, safety, and hope inside you and around you. You are not defined by harm done to you—you are defined by your courage and resilience."

2. Extension Activity:
    Shield Connection (5 minutes)
        Begin by having students look back at their "Shield of Strength."
        Prompt: "What is one word, phrase, or symbol from your shield that reminds you of your inner strength?"
    Mantra Writing (10 minutes)
        Students turn their chosen word/idea into a personal mantra (positive, present-tense affirmation).
        Examples: "I am strong and worthy of respect." "My boundaries matter." "I carry resilience and courage inside me."
        Encourage creativity: students can make it poetic, rhythmic, or symbolic.
    Creative Expression (10 minutes)
        Students decorate their mantra on an index card, bookmark, or small poster.
        Option: add artwork, colors, or symbols that feel empowering.
        Students can keep it private (in a journal, wallet, or locker) or choose to display it anonymously on a classroom "Wall of Hope."

3. Closing Circle (5 minutes)
    Invite students (only if comfortable) to share their mantra aloud or simply hold it silently.
    End with a unifying affirmation: "Together, we carry strength, respect, and hope. You belong, you matter, and your voice is powerful."

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse in young children and teens is not simply an isolated behavior; rather, it reflects a wider set of social, emotional, and environmental challenges. For elementary-aged students, these challenges may include growing up in homes where alcohol or drugs are present, witnessing parental conflict, or experiencing neglect, all of which can disrupt healthy brain development and increase vulnerability to risky behaviors later. For teens, the risks often expand to include peer pressure, exposure to social media influences, and the search for identity and belonging, which can intersect with earlier adverse experiences. Research shows that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) such as abuse, neglect, and living in dysfunctional households, are strongly connected to a higher likelihood of developing substance use disorders across the lifespan (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2019). This resource will explore the impact of experiencing parental substance abuse in greater depth in later sections, highlighting how these early experiences can influence emotional regulation, decision-making, and long-term well-being, as well as strategies for supporting children and teens in navigating these challenges.

According to data from the 2023 Monitoring the Future survey, while some types of substance use among youth have decreased, certain forms like vaping marijuana and nicotine have increased significantly in recent years (Miech et al., 2025). These changes show that prevention efforts need to adapt to new ways substances are being used and accessed. It is also troubling that students who face academic or social challenges are more likely to use substances, often as a way to cope with feelings of isolation, hopelessness, or low self-esteem (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2024).

Schools must adopt trauma-informed approaches to fully understand these issues. Recognizing how trauma affects behavior allows educators, counselors, and social workers to respond in ways that reduce conflict, build trust, and provide necessary support (SAMHSA, 2019). Integrating character education into everyday teaching further helps students develop internal strengths to make positive and values-based choices. For example, lessons on respect and responsibility, combined with service-learning and consistent adult role models, can encourage students to embrace these values and resist negative peer pressure (Character.org, 2023).

VS Case Study - Substance Abuse:

One high school student came to us dealing marijuana and frequently using. Traditional discipline had pushed him out of other schools, but at Victory we paired firm accountability with relational mentoring. Lessons on Self-Discipline and Perseverance were reinforced with counseling and support groups. Staff made it clear: his choices had consequences, but so did his potential. Slowly, he shifted. He stopped dealing, found pride in helping younger students, and eventually became a peer mentor. His story now encourages others struggling with similar temptations.

VS Case Study - Substance Abuse:

An eighth-grade girl at Victory Schools carried the heavy emotional toll of having an older sibling struggling with substance abuse. She often internalized guilt and sadness, which surfaced as withdrawal from peers and frustration in class. Victory teachers introduced the character pillar of compassion, helping her to extend kindness both to herself and to others. Through journaling, group discussions, and restorative activities, she began to see that compassion could replace judgment with understanding. She practiced offering support to classmates facing their own struggles, while also learning to give herself grace in moments of stress. Over time, her relationships strengthened, and she demonstrated that compassion not only helped her process her sibling's challenges but also made her a positive influence in the school community.

In the end, tackling youth substance abuse requires more than simply warning students about drug dangers. It demands a comprehensive strategy that addresses trauma healing while building the moral and social skills students need to stay grounded when faced with challenges or temptation. Combining trauma-informed care with strong character education creates a practical, research-supported framework for prevention, early support, and fostering long-lasting resilience in students.

Causes of Trauma Related to Substance Abuse

The link between trauma and substance abuse is well established across clinical and educational fields. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2019) highlights that young people who experience four or more ACE's such as physical or emotional abuse, neglect, or witnessing domestic violence, are far more likely to use substances during their teenage years and later in life. These early traumatic experiences interfere with the brain's development, especially areas involved in reward and stress regulation, while also undermining emotional regulation and the ability to build secure, trusting relationships. These disruptions in both biology and relationships make youth more vulnerable to turning to substances as a way to manage emotional and physical distress (SAMHSA, 2024).

Environmental trauma also plays a major role in shaping how adolescents engage with substances. Those growing up in high-poverty neighborhoods or communities lacking resources often face ongoing stressors like unstable housing, community violence, food insecurity, and systemic discrimination. These persistent hardships, often described as toxic stress, can alter brain structure and function, increasing impulsivity and weakening decision-making abilities (National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2020).

Family-related trauma is another critical factor in adolescent substance use. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2023) points out that parental substance use disorders profoundly affect family stability and the well-being of children. In such households, inconsistent caregiving, neglect, and emotional absence often cause children to feel fear, confusion, and abandonment. These difficult home environments increase the likelihood that children will turn to drugs or alcohol to cope with the emotional turmoil. The report stresses that in these situations, substance use is more often a coping mechanism rather than mere rebellion. It also highlights the need for coordinated efforts that address both family dynamics and individual treatment to support these children effectively (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2023).

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2020) expands on how trauma like physical, sexual, or psychological abuse, neglect, witnessing domestic violence, or the sudden loss of a loved one deeply affects children's emotional and psychological growth. These experiences can trigger ongoing struggles with anxiety, depression, behavioral changes, and challenges in forming healthy attachments. When children endure such trauma, they may turn to substances as a way to numb the pain or regain a sense of control. Trauma disrupts their feelings of safety and trust, making risky behaviors, including substance misuse, more likely (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2020). Trauma's effects extend beyond the individual child, impacting family relationships and often contributing to further instability, which in turn raises the risk for substance misuse (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2020).

Schools also support students experiencing vicarious trauma, meaning they have not gone through trauma personally but are significantly impacted by the difficulties faced by close friends, siblings, or family members. For instance, a student whose friend's sibling overdoses might feel grief, fear, and vulnerability. Even without firsthand trauma, this exposure can lead to stress-related behaviors like substance use, especially if the school environment does not provide consistent adult support, emotional validation, and reinforcement of core ethical values such as respect and self-control (Character.org, 2023; National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2020).

These overlapping factors between trauma and substance abuse show why schools need to take a comprehensive approach, one that not only responds to trauma with compassion and support but also strengthens character education. Together, these strategies can help students build resilience, develop self-awareness, and cultivate the moral foundation necessary to make healthy choices and resist substance use as a way to cope.

Effects on Children

Social Impact

The social consequences of substance abuse in adolescence are significant and far-reaching. When young people misuse substances, they often find themselves drifting away from positive peer groups and instead gravitate toward social circles where substance use and other risky behaviors are normalized. This shift can create a cycle that reinforces drug use and makes recovery more challenging (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2021). Additionally, adolescents who have experienced trauma may struggle with emotional regulation, which can manifest as irritability, impulsiveness, or emotional withdrawal. These difficulties interfere with their ability to form or maintain healthy friendships, which are vital sources of social support during adolescence (American Psychological Association, 2020).
Substance abuse can also impair brain functions related to empathy and social understanding, making it harder for youth to relate to others and engage cooperatively. This reduction in empathy undermines important social skills such as compassion and cooperation, which are foundational for moral development and positive social interactions (National Institute on Drug Abuse [NIDA], 2020). Without these social-emotional competencies, adolescents may become further isolated, impeding their capacity to engage meaningfully in their communities and hindering the development of social responsibility (SAMHSA, 2021).

Schools can play a pivotal role in countering these social challenges by implementing trauma-informed practices alongside character education. Teaching values such as respect, responsibility, and empathy within a supportive school environment helps students build healthier relationships and resist peer pressure to use substances (Character.org, 2023; SAMHSA, 2021). Such approaches not only aid individual healing and growth but also contribute to creating a positive school culture that promotes resilience and long-term well-being.

Emotional Impact

Unresolved trauma often impairs a young person's ability to regulate their emotions, a challenge known as emotional dysregulation. This difficulty can manifest as cycles of emotional numbness alternating with sudden, intense outbursts. Such emotional instability increases the likelihood that students will turn to harmful coping mechanisms, including substance use or self-harm. Research from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2021) indicates that trauma-exposed youth frequently experience co-occurring mental health disorders such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which further elevate the risk of substance misuse. When educators and counselors understand these connections, they are better equipped to respond with empathy and prioritize therapeutic support over punitive measures.

Schools that focus on creating emotionally safe and predictable environments help students develop critical skills in emotional intelligence and self-regulation (SAMHSA, 2021). Integrating trauma-informed practices with character education approaches that emphasize virtues like self-control, kindness, and perseverance, serves as a powerful dual protective factor. These programs equip students with healthy strategies to manage their emotions and reduce the temptation to use substances as a coping mechanism (Character.org, 2023; SAMHSA, 2021).

VS Case Study - Substance Abuse

A third-grade boy at Victory Schools was struggling emotionally due to his mother's ongoing substance abuse. The instability at home left him distracted, prone to sadness, and often reluctant to participate in classroom activities. Victory teachers recognized his pain and supported him through the character pillar of perseverance. He was encouraged to set daily academic and behavioral goals, even on difficult mornings, and learned that perseverance meant continuing to try despite setbacks. With structured routines, encouragement, and recognition of his effort, the student began to push through challenges with greater confidence. Over time, he developed resilience, finding pride in completing tasks and maintaining focus even when emotions weighed heavily on him. By the end of the school year, he had grown in determination, showing that perseverance allowed him to navigate hardship with strength and consistency.

Moreover, evidence from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2019) reinforces that nurturing social connections and fostering supportive school climates strengthen emotional well-being and buffer the adverse effects of trauma. Supportive relationships with caring adults and peers help adolescents build resilience, alleviate stress, and develop adaptive coping skills, all

of which decrease the likelihood of substance misuse. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2020) similarly emphasizes that schools providing consistent, caring relationships and predictable routines foster a sense of safety that promotes emotional regulation and reduces risky behaviors among youth.

Together, these findings highlight the importance of a comprehensive school approach that integrates trauma-sensitive practices with character education to lay a foundation for emotional growth and healthier behavioral choices. For example, a school implementing a program that combines trauma care with character education focused on respect, responsibility, and self-control could train teachers and counselors to recognize trauma symptoms and utilize restorative practices rather than punitive responses. Additionally, establishing peer mentoring groups that encourage kindness and perseverance can foster a safer, more connected school environment. Over time, such efforts may significantly reduce disciplinary referrals related to substance use and enhance students' overall well-being.

Cognitive Impact

Substance abuse during adolescence can significantly disrupt critical brain functions, particularly in regions responsible for decision-making, risk assessment, and executive functioning. Because the adolescent brain is still developing, it is especially vulnerable to the harmful effects of substances such as alcohol and marijuana. The Monitoring the Future Survey (Miech et al., 2025) links frequent use of these substances during adolescence with impairments in attention, memory, and cognitive flexibility. When combined with trauma, which itself alters brain function and stress regulation (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2019), these effects can compound, resulting in even greater challenges with learning and behavior.

Cognitively, students affected by both trauma and substance use may appear inattentive, disorganized, or oppositional. These behaviors often stem from underlying neurobiological disruptions rather than deliberate misconduct. Research from the Institute of Education Sciences (IES, 2021) shows that trauma-exposed students commonly struggle with executive functioning skills that are essential for planning, impulse control, and adapting to changing demands. It is important for educators and school staff to approach these signs with compassion and curiosity instead of judgment. Trauma-informed cognitive supports such as predictable routines, brain breaks, and differentiated instruction can help lessen these effects, while character education approaches reinforce personal responsibility and sound decision-making. Schools that implement trauma-informed approaches have seen improvements in cognitive functioning and academic performance among students affected by trauma (Character.org, 2023; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2021).

For example, a high school might adopt a trauma-informed framework where teachers establish consistent classroom routines and provide short mindful breaks to help students regulate their emotions and attention. Instruction could be adapted to include multiple ways for students to engage with material, such as hands-on activities or small group discussions. At the same time, the school's character education approach could focus on self-discipline and thoughtful decision-making through class discussions, role-playing, and peer mentoring. This integrated approach creates a supportive environment that addresses both cognitive challenges and character development, helping students build resilience against substance misuse and improve academic outcomes.

Physical Impact

Substance abuse during adolescence can seriously affect physical health, causing both immediate and long-term consequences. Students may show symptoms such as persistent fatigue, frequent illness, digestive problems, or sudden changes in appetite and weight. While these signs are often mistaken for typical adolescent behaviors or lifestyle choices, they may actually indicate underlying substance use or physiological stress related to trauma (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2019).
Trauma and chronic stress negatively affect the body's immune response and are associated with increased risks of respiratory illnesses, heart conditions, and other chronic health problems (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], 2021). When combined with substance use, these vulnerabilities can worsen. For example, an adolescent who has experienced trauma and regularly smokes or drinks alcohol may experience more severe asthma symptoms or slower recovery from illnesses, resulting in more missed school days and greater difficulty keeping up academically.

School nurses and health educators play a vital role in identifying these warning signs early and coordinating care with families and healthcare providers. Additionally, health education programs that incorporate character development, emphasizing self-care, respect for one's body, and responsible decision making, can encourage students to adopt healthier habits. For instance, curricula that include reflective activities on the importance of integrity in decision making may help students resist peer pressure to engage in substance use (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019).

Personal Impact

Trauma and substance use deeply affect a student's self-perception and sense of agency. Many adolescents internalize these struggles as personal failings, which fosters shame, isolation, and secrecy. This negative self-view often leads to continued substance use as a way to escape or numb difficult emotions.
Trauma-informed approaches in schools focus on restoration and support rather than blame, helping students rebuild a positive identity. Character education supports this process by promoting values such as courage, honesty, and accountability which empower students to face challenges and make healthier choices (Character.org, 2023).

In practice, schools might offer peer support groups or mentorship programs where students connect with adults and peers who model resilience and ethical behavior. For example, a school could create a mentoring program that pairs students with trusted staff or community volunteers who provide guidance, encourage positive habits, and reinforce the importance of integrity. These meaningful connections can reduce feelings of isolation and inspire students toward recovery and personal growth (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2021).

Academic Impact

Adolescents who misuse substances face a higher risk of academic difficulties, including frequent absences, declining grades, behavioral challenges, and ultimately dropping out. These challenges are often worsened by underlying trauma or stress, which can impair concentration, memory, and motivation (Miech et al., 2025).

Schools that adopt trauma-informed and character-based frameworks and approaches show promising results. Supports such as flexible deadlines, counseling services, and peer mentoring help reengage students facing these obstacles. Additionally, integrating character education into academics promotes traits like perseverance, self-discipline, and ethical decision making, all of which contribute to better school performance. For example, schools implementing social-emotional learning programs based on frameworks like those from the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2020) report improved student engagement and reduced risky behaviors. Likewise, the CCCE Framework for Purposeful Cultures emphasizes the importance of cultivating schoolwide values and relationships that give students a strong sense of belonging and shared purpose (Center for Character and Citizenship Education [CCCE], 2025). The PRIMED model guides educators to be intentional and reflective in character instruction, ensuring that positive traits are not taught in isolation but embedded throughout the learning environment (Center for Character & Citizenship, n.d.).

Similarly, the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues highlights the development of moral, civic, performance, and intellectual virtues as a foundation for student flourishing (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2017). Finally, Character.org provides schools with principles for building caring communities that strengthen respect, responsibility, and integrity (Character.org, 2020). When aligned with trauma-informed practices, these approaches not only foster a culture of resilience and respect but also directly impact academic outcomes—students demonstrate stronger focus, improved classroom behavior, higher attendance, and greater motivation to persist through challenges. Together, these models equip students with the skills and mindset needed to thrive both academically and personally.

Where to Get Additional Support

Schools do not have to face the challenges of adolescent substance abuse and trauma alone. It is crucial for school counselors, social workers, administrators, and other educators to build strong partnerships with community agencies and tap into state and national resources that provide free, evidence-based tools and training. For example, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) offers the National Child Traumatic Stress Initiative, which includes comprehensive toolkits designed specifically for educators. These resources provide trauma screeners that help identify students who may need additional support, and community treatment locators to connect families with appropriate mental health services (SAMHSA, 2021).

The National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) provides a wide range of resources specifically designed for school staff, including guides to help recognize early warning signs of substance use and strategies for effective intervention in school settings. These materials assist educators in developing prevention programs that are both age-appropriate and culturally sensitive (NIDA, 2025). Schools have a vital role in preventing and addressing adolescent substance use by fostering supportive and informed environments. According to NIDA (2022), educators are uniquely positioned to identify subtle indicators of substance use and intervene using evidence-based classroom strategies. The "Mind Matters" guide emphasizes the importance of building positive relationships, encouraging open communication, and applying trauma-sensitive teaching methods. For instance, teachers can promote resilience by incorporating lessons on decision-making, stress management, and emotional regulation into their daily instruction.

Moreover, the guide advocates for ongoing training of school staff to recognize behavioral changes associated with substance use and trauma, supporting a proactive rather than reactive approach. When these strategies are combined with character education focused on responsibility and self-awareness, they form a comprehensive framework that nurtures students' cognitive and emotional health, reduces risky behaviors, and encourages sustained academic and social success.

At the local level, coalitions such as the Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America (CADCA) provide schools with access to prevention curricula, training opportunities, and technical assistance. State specific organizations like Arizona's Prevention Resource Center or California's Behavioral Health Services offer additional resources, including workshops for school personnel and family outreach programs. These collaborations ensure schools are not working in isolation but are part of a broader network addressing youth substance use and trauma.

The U.S. Department of Education (2023) highlights the vital role schools and families play in preventing youth substance misuse by fostering safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments. Schools are encouraged to implement evidence-based prevention programs and provide education to students and families about the risks of substance use and how to recognize warning signs. Strengthening protective factors such as positive student-teacher relationships and community involvement can increase resilience and reduce substance misuse risk. By combining these strategies, schools create comprehensive support systems that promote both prevention and overall student well-being.

In practice, schools might invite coalition representatives to conduct professional development sessions on trauma-informed care and substance abuse prevention. For example, a school could organize a series of workshops where community mental health experts train teachers and counselors on how to identify trauma symptoms and implement character education strategies that

build resilience and ethical decision-making in students.

It is also vital for every school to establish a coordinated support team. This team should include mental health professionals trained in trauma-informed practices and character development, school counselors, social workers, family liaisons, and even student representatives. Such a multidisciplinary group can meet regularly to review cases, plan interventions, and ensure that supports are tailored to individual student needs.
Professional development should extend beyond one-time training and become a continuous process that emphasizes trauma-informed teaching methods, restorative discipline practices, cultural humility, and character-focused instruction. For example, educators might participate in ongoing coaching sessions to learn how to create classroom environments where students feel emotionally safe, understood, and empowered to make responsible choices. Incorporating character education in this way supports students not only academically but also in their personal growth, helping them develop a strong moral compass and resilience against substance use.

Reflection and Next Steps

Creating a trauma-informed and character-strong response to student substance abuse calls for courageous leadership and ongoing collaboration. School teams must move beyond reactive discipline and commit to long-term cultural change grounded in safety, empathy, and moral purpose. Substance misuse among youth is rarely just a matter of poor choices; it often reflects deeper unmet emotional needs and disrupted development.

The Child Mind Institute (2023) emphasizes the critical role mental health plays in teen substance use. Many adolescents struggling with anxiety, depression, or other mental health challenges may turn to drugs or alcohol as a way to cope. This highlights the need for schools to look beyond surface behaviors and address students' mental health as an integral part of trauma-informed care.

By integrating mental health support with trauma-informed approaches, schools can more effectively meet the whole student's needs. This ensures that students receive help not only for their behaviors but also for the emotional struggles that often underlie substance use. Building this comprehensive support system fosters safer, more compassionate school environments where students can heal, grow, and thrive.

Key reflective questions for schools include:

- Do current policies and interventions at your workplace or within personal networks reflect an understanding of trauma and its connection to substance abuse?
- How are we proactively teaching students the skills and values needed to resist peer pressure and regulate emotions?
- Are we building strong, trusting relationships with students that create safe spaces for disclosure and growth?
- How do we evaluate the effectiveness of our character education programming in shaping student behavior and resilience?
- In what ways can student voice be elevated in the development of schoolwide prevention strategies?
- Schools should also consider the following character-specific reflection questions:
- Are students explicitly taught how to apply ethical reasoning when faced with decisions involving drugs or peer influence?
- How do school rituals and traditions promote values like courage, honesty, and perseverance?
- Are we recognizing and celebrating students who demonstrate character growth, not just academic achievement?
- Moving forward, school leaders must invest in systems that align trauma awareness with the intentional cultivation of virtue. Substance abuse prevention is not just about stopping behavior, it's about shaping hearts, habits, and hope.

Activity K-2: "Healthy Me vs. Hurting Me"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Help young students understand the difference between healthy and harmful substances. Build basic self-awareness and safety decision-making.	Responsibility, Self-awareness, Safety	Focuses on body awareness and choice, offers emotional safety through trusted adult interaction.	Grades K–2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
American School Counselor Association Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success: B-SMS 1: Demonstrate ability to assume responsibility B-SMS 7: Demonstrate effective coping skills when faced with a problem	Students correctly identified healthy vs. harmful items with 80% accuracy on the worksheet. Observation of verbal responses.	Healthy vs. Harmful worksheet Crayons or markers Puppet or plush for modeling	Individual

Steps:

1. Introduce a puppet showing concern about not knowing what is safe to eat or use.

2. Discuss what "healthy" and "hurting" means in a child-friendly way (e.g., "juice vs. poison").

3. Complete the worksheet identifying and coloring "Healthy Me" and "Hurting Me" images.

4. Share that we must be aware of what is good for us and not so we can be safe and responsible. Ask students to share their own ideas as well.

5. Reinforce what to do if unsure about something (e.g., "Always ask a trusted adult.") Discuss how this is responsible and safe.

Closing:

Review five safe adults a child can talk to.
Extension: Send home a coloring page with family conversation questions.

Handouts:

"Healthy vs. Harmful" Worksheet

Activity K-2: “My Super Safe Choices”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Teach children how to recognize and name safe choices in a group setting.	Safety, Respect, Listening	Provides predictability and safety. Builds peer relationships in a supportive way.	Grades K–2
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
American School Counselor Association - Mindsets and Behaviors for Student Success B-SS 2: Create positive and supportive relationships with other students B-SMS 2: Demonstrate self-discipline and self-control	Verbal participation, correct use of red/ green signs.	Red/Green “Choice” cards Create picture cards of scenarios Feelings chart	Group (4–6 students)

Steps:

1. Introduce “Super Safe” vs. “Risky” choices using simple visuals.

2. Pass out red (stop) and green (go) cards.

3. Read scenarios aloud: “Your friend gives you a mystery candy. What color card do you hold up?”

4. Facilitate a brief discussion after each. Focus on respect for ourselves and others by doing the right thing. Share what is safe and what is not and why that is important in real life.

Closing:

Use a feelings chart to name how they might feel in each scenario.
Extension: Create a “Safe Choice” crown for each student.

Handouts:

“Feelings Chart”
Red/Green Cards
Super Safe vs. Risky Choices
Super Safe vs. Risky Red/Green Card Activity Discussion

Activity 3-5: “My Inner Superpower Shield”

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
To help students recognize their inner strengths, safe supports, and coping tools when life feels uncertain or stressful.	Courage, resilience, hope, self-awareness	Safety: Students share only what feels comfortable; focus is on inner strengths, not details of trauma. Empowerment: Builds self-efficacy and voice through creative expression. Choice: Participation, sharing, and symbolism are all optional. Connection: Encourages identifying safe relationships and positive support. Regulation: Starts with mindfulness and ends with hopeful reflection.	Grades 3-5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
CASEL Core 1: Self-Awareness CASEL Core 2: Self-Management CASEL Core 4: Relationship Skills	1. Teacher Observation (During the Activity) As students work and share, note evidence of: Engagement: Is the student participating (drawing, writing, or listening)? Understanding: Can the student identify at least one strength, safe person/place, or coping tool? Connection to Traits: Does the student show basic understanding of the key traits (resilience, courage, hope, self-awareness)? 2. Student Reflection (Exit Slip or Discussion Prompt) After sharing, ask one or two simple reflection prompts (students can write or share aloud): “What’s one superpower (trait) that helps you when things feel hard?” “Who or what helps you feel safe or strong?” “What’s one new strength you learned about yourself today?” This can be verbal for younger or struggling writers. 3. Optional Journal Connection If your students keep journals, have them add a short reflection: “My superpower is _____ because _____.” or “When I use my courage (or other trait), I can _____.” 4. Teacher Notes (Post-Activity) Briefly reflect on: Which students showed strong self-awareness or empathy? Who may need extra support identifying safe people or coping tools? How can this activity guide follow-up lessons or check-ins?	Circle of chairs Talking piece/object Chart paper or white board Markers Sticky notes Journals	Small group/whole class

Steps:

1. Begin with a short breathing or movement activity to calm the body and mind.
   Example: "Let's take 3 deep breaths together. Imagine breathing in calm and breathing out any worries." (3 minutes)

2. Review class agreements:
   For example: Everyone's feelings are respected. You can share or just listen.
   What's said in the circle stays in the circle. No one has to talk about home or personal problems. (2 minutes)

3. Introduction to the activity
   "Sometimes life can feel confusing or hard. Everyone has challenges, but we also have superpowers inside us, things that help us stay strong, calm, and kind, even when life feels tough. Today we'll create a Superpower Shield that shows what helps protect and support you." (5 minutes)

4. Introduce and briefly explain four key traits using kid-friendly language and examples:
   Courage – Doing the right thing even when it's hard (like asking for help).
   Resilience – Bouncing back after tough times (like trying again after a bad day).
   Hope – Believing good things can happen (like setting a goal for the future).
   Self-awareness – Knowing what you're feeling and what helps you feel better.
   Ask: "Which of these superpowers helps you most right now? Which one would you like to grow stronger in?"
   Students can write or draw a small symbol (like a heart, lightning bolt, or star) to represent that trait on their paper. (7 minutes)

5. Create the Superpower Shield: Students fold a paper in half or use a shield template divided into four parts:
   My Strengths: What makes me strong (e.g., kindness, determination, imagination).
   My Safe People & Places: Who helps me feel safe or calm (e.g., a teacher, grandparent, pet, park, or library).
   My Coping Tools: What I can do when I feel upset (e.g., take a walk, draw, listen to music, breathe deeply).
   My Hopes: What I look forward to or dream about (e.g., "I want to help animals," "I want to be happy," "I can get through hard things").
   Students can draw, color, or collage. (15–20 minutes)

6. Reflection & Sharing: Invite (but never require) students to share one part of their shield.
   Prompts: "What's one superpower that helps you most?" "Who or what helps you feel safe and cared for?"
   Teacher reinforces: "Each of you has superpowers that no one can take away. When life feels hard, remember your shield—it shows who you are and how strong you can be." (5-7 minutes)

Closing:

1. Optional Extension: "Superpower Reminder" (5 minutes)
   Students write one word or draw a small symbol from their shield (e.g., hope, courage, smile, heart) on a sticky note or card to keep in their folder, backpack, or desk as a reminder of their strength.

2. Optional Journal Connection
   If your students keep journals, have them add a short reflection: "My superpower is _____ because _____." or "When I use my courage (or other trait), I can _____." (5-20 minutes)

Activity 3-5: "Substance-Free Superstars"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Promote teamwork while identifying substance-free lifestyles and healthy alternatives.	Courage, Responsibility, Self-Control	Empowers student voice and shared problem-solving.	Grades 3-5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
B-SS 6: Use effective collaboration and cooperation skills B-SMS 5: Demonstrate perseverance to achieve long- and short-term goal	Participation in team poster and "healthy choice" brainstorming.	Poster board Magazines Glue, scissors, markers	Group (5-8 students)

Steps:

1. Introduce a team challenge: Make a "Substance-Free Superstar Life" poster.
   Have a discussion with the students either a mini-lesson classroom discussion or a read-aloud.

Mini-Lesson Example:
   Objective: Students understand behaviors that keep themselves and others safe and healthy.
   Procedure:
      Ask students: "What does it mean to be healthy and safe?"
      Make a list on the board of health and safety behaviors (examples: washing hands, eating fruits and vegetables, wearing helmets, saying no to harmful substances).
      Briefly discuss why each behavior matters and how it helps us and those around us.
      Connect this to being a 'Substance-Free Superstar' – making safe choices keeps your body and mind strong.

Read-Aloud Discussion Example:
   Books / Stories Ideas:
      "The Berenstain Bears and Too Much Junk Food" – illustrates healthy vs. unhealthy choices.
      "Officer Buckle and Gloria" – highlights safety tips and promoting safety for others.
      "I Can Handle It" by Laurie Wright – addresses decision-making and self-care.

2. Procedure:
   - Read the story aloud.
   - Pause to ask questions:
      "What choice did the character make that was healthy or safe?"
      "How could making unsafe choices affect them or their friends?"
   - Discuss connections to substance-free choices.
   - Discuss why having self-control and making responsible choices requires courage but is what keeps us safe.
   - Groups cut images and words that promote health and safety.
   - Each team presents their poster.

Closing:

Create a group pledge.
Extension: Display posters around the school.
Great activity for "Red Ribbon Week"

Activity 3-5: "Truth or Trouble"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Help students recognize media influence and peer pressure around substance use.	integrity, courage, responsibility, confidence	Gives students space to share fears/ confusion. Validates emotions around peer pressure.	Grades 3-5
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
B-SMS 6: Demonstrate ability to overcome barriers B-SMS 10: Demonstrate ability to manage transitions and adapt to change	Completion of "Truth or Trouble" worksheet, verbal responses.	"Truth or Trouble?" Worksheet "What Could You Do Instead?" Worksheet Highlighter pens Images from advertisements/magazines/ internet for cigarettes or vapes, alcohol advertisements, etc. Free, Age-Appropriate Image Sources: Pixabay – High-quality, free images and illustrations; search for "kids eating," "healthy food," "exercise," etc. Unsplash – Free high-resolution photos; good for general lifestyle images. Pexels – Free photos and videos; great for activity-related images. Openclipart – Free clipart; perfect for simple visuals for young kids. Public Domain Vectors – Vector images in public domain; great for coloring sheets or simple graphics.	Individual

Steps:

1. Discuss where kids see things about substances (TV, games, peers).

2. Examine pictures and underline/highlight what messages they give.

3. Complete worksheet: "What could you do instead?" by discussing and role-playing with the prompts.

4. Complete worksheet: "Is this truth or trouble?" and share/discuss responses.

Closing:

1. Role-play saying no with confidence.
2. Discuss why saying no requires integrity, courage, responsibility, and confidence but is important when we encounter ads, peer-pressure, or other temptations. Discuss ideas for showing these traits in our responses.
3. Extension: Design a "Say No" superhero badge.

Handouts:

"Truth or Trouble" Worksheet
What Could You Do Instead?

Activity 6-8: "Real Talk Circles"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Create space to discuss substance-related myths, pressure, and realities.	Respect, Honesty, Empathy	Creates safe peer space for truth-telling and understanding social pressures.	Grades 6-8
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
B-SS 4: Demonstrate empathy B-SS 8: Demonstrate advocacy skills and ability to assert self	Group discussion contributions, reflection cards.	Talking piece Scenario prompt cards Reflection slips	Group (6-10 students)

Steps:

1. Sit in a circle. Introduce "talking piece" for taking turns.
    - Real Talk Circles are a structured group discussion method that gives students a safe, respectful space to share thoughts, feelings, and experiences.
    - This is particularly effective for sensitive topics like substance abuse, peer pressure, or decision-making.

Key Components:
- Seating Arrangement: Sit in a Circle
- Everyone sits in a circle so each student can see each other.
- The circle symbolizes equality — no one is "in front" or "in charge."
- Helps students feel included and encourages participation.

Introduce the Talking Piece
- A talking piece is an object (e.g., mini stress ball, small stuffed animal, or symbolic item) passed around the circle.
- Only the person holding the talking piece may speak.
- This ensures everyone gets a turn and promotes active listening without interruptions.
- The talking piece also helps students focus attention and provides a sense of safety.

2. Establish Group Norms
- Speak respectfully and listen actively.
- Keep what is shared confidential (except safety concerns).
- Be honest, but kind.
- Pass the talking piece along after sharing.

3. Facilitating the Circle
- The counselor or group leader introduces a prompt or discussion question.
- Example prompts:
    - "Tell us about a time you felt peer pressure and how you handled it."
    - "What are healthy ways you deal with stress or anger?"
    - "What does being a good friend mean to you?"
- Students take turns sharing while holding the talking piece.
- The facilitator encourages reflection, validates feelings, and reinforces healthy choices.

4. Reflection and Closing
- After everyone has shared, the facilitator can ask:
    - "What did you learn from listening to others?"
    - "What is one healthy choice you want to make this week?"
- Optional: students can write a short reflection or goal.

* Benefits:
    Encourages active listening and empathy.
    Provides a safe space for self-expression.
    Helps students process complex emotions in a supportive environment.
    Supports trauma-informed practices by emphasizing control, choice, and safety.

* Talking Piece Idea:
    Item: Mini Brain Stress Ball
    Why it works:
        Relatable: It symbolizes making healthy choices and the impact of substances on the brain.
        Engaging: It's tactile, easy to pass, and helps anxious students focus during discussions.
        Trauma-informed: Supports grounding, provides a sense of control, and reduces tension during potentially sensitive conversations.

- Read scenarios from the prompt cards, such as: "Your best friend hides pills in their locker."

- Discuss reactions, facts, feelings.

- Each student fills out a reflection card.

Closing:

Share one takeaway from circle time.
Extension: "Myth vs. Truth" poster project.

Handouts:

"Scenario Prompt Cards"

"Reflection Slips"

Activity 6-8: "The Choice Chain"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Understand the ripple effect of substance use and build personal refusal skills.	Accountability, Courage, Critical Thinking	Encourages personal reflection. Builds inner strength and decision-making control.	Grades 6-8
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
B-SMS 4: Demonstrate ability to delay immediate gratification B-SMS 9: Demonstrate personal safety skills	Completed "Choice Chain" worksheet and refusal script.	"Choice Chain" worksheet Scenario cards Blank index cards"	Individual

Steps:

1. Present a scenario: "Your friend dares you to vape behind school."

2. As a group, work through the Choice Chain: Decision, Consequence, Impact.

3. Facilitate a discussion about how demonstrating accountability is important in facing conflicts; having courage to stand up for what is right is hard but important; and the ability to think critically aids in solving problems.

4. Practice saying no in a way that feels right. Connect to courage and confidence and relevance in real life.

Closing:

Write a "safe script" for tough situations.
Extension: Journal prompt: "What's a strength I have when saying no?"

Handouts:

"The Choice Chain"

Activity 9-12: "Fork in the Road"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Explore future goals and how substance use can alter paths.	Vision, Accountability, Self-Respect	Honors student voice and autonomy. Reclaims control over one's future	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
B-LS 7: Identify long- and short-term academic, career and social/emotional goals B-SMS 6: Demonstrate ability to overcome barriers to success	"Fork in the Road" map and verbal plan.	"Fork in the Road" worksheet Pen/highlighter Career cluster chart	Individual

Steps:

1. Discuss their future goals (i.e., college, job, family) and how future-mindedness/ vision can support us in making and achieving goals, staying on a positive path, and getting through hard times/ experiences.

2. Discuss accountability in action choices and the need for self-respect when achieving our visionary goals. You may also discuss potential obstacles to the goals and strategies for how to overcome them.

3. Use the "Career Cluster Chart" as a visual practical tool that:
   - Helps students link personal goals to career opportunities
   - Makes the consequences of substance use tangible
   - Encourages students to make informed choices by seeing how their path affects real careers

4. Complete two paths on the worksheet: one with substance use, one without.

5. Discuss how each path affects the goal.

Closing:

Create a vision board.
Extension: Identify one trusted adult for future support.

Handouts:

"Fork in the Road" Worksheet
"Career Cluster Chart"

Activity 9-12: "Substance Abuse Courtroom"

Goal/Outcome/Objective(s):	Character Traits Targeted:	Connection to Trauma Informed Practices:	Age Range:
Critically evaluate substance myths, peer pressure, and real-world outcomes.	Critical Thinking, Integrity, Leadership	Explores multiple viewpoints; encourages meaningful dialogue and peer validation.	Grades 9-12
Standards:	**Assessment:**	**Materials Needed:**	**Independent/Group Activity:**
B-SS 9: Demonstrate social maturity and behaviors appropriate to the situation B-SS 5: Demonstrate ethical decision-making and social responsibility	Participation in case roles and reflection writing.	Court Case script Role cards (Judge, Lawyers, Witnesses, Jury) Verdict sheet	Group (8-12 students)

Steps:

1. Present fictional case: "Teen athlete suspended for vaping."

2. Assign roles and conduct a mock trial. Encourage critical thinking, perspective taking, having integrity in reactions, and courageous responses.

3. The jury deliberates and completes the "Verdict Sheet", then, the group presents the verdict.

4. Students reflect: "What did I learn from this case?"

Closing:

Reflection writing: "What matters more—fitting in or standing up? What character strengths are necessary for doing what is right? How can I foster those strengths in myself?"
Extension: Create PSA videos for campus awareness.

Handouts:

"Court Case Script"

Role Cards

Verdict Sheet

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