

# Understanding Trauma in School

Abbi Schuh- Vineland 3rd-6th gr Counselor, LPC  
DeSoto #73 School District  
DeSoto, MO

## SESSION OUTCOMES:

- ❑ Understand what trauma is, what could be a traumatic event, as well as what effects trauma has on the brain and development
- ❑ Understand what trauma might look like in your students, in their families, or in yourself
- ❑ Learn what traumatic responses are and receive examples of trauma-informed strategies to use within your classroom and school

What does this  
image have to do  
with trauma?



# What is trauma?

Can be **direct experience, witnessing of or learning about** events perceived as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening and that can have lasting adverse effects on an individual's functioning and physical, social and/or emotional well being such as, but not limited to:

**Sexual Abuse or Assault**

**Physical Abuse**

**School Violence**

**Fires**

**Traumatic Loss/Separation**

**Abandonment**

**Domestic Violence**

**Bullying**

**Suicide/Death of loved one**

**Mass Disasters**

**Kidnapping**

**Witnessing police activity**

**Travel Accidents**

**Community Violence**

**Weather-related events**

**Terrorism**

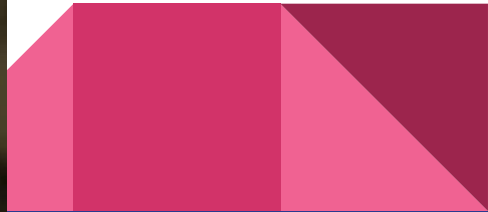
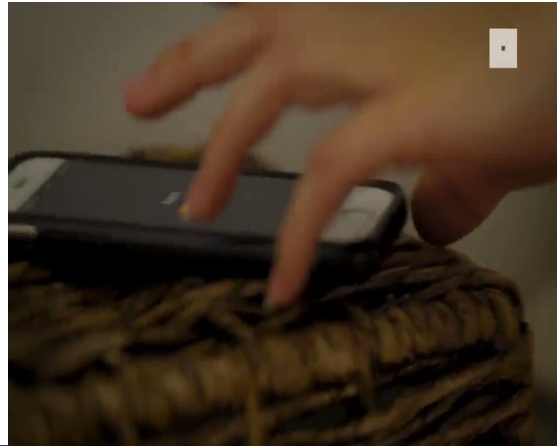
**Medical Trauma**

**Incarceration of relative**

# Trauma is...

- Our brain and body's response to an event
- Our brain's way of keeping us safe in a situation perceived as dangerous
- Dependent on the individual's personality and previous experiences
- Impacted by the individual's relationship and attachment to their primary caregiver

[What is trauma?- Bessel van der Kolk](#)



# What can trauma look like?

- Anxiety, fear or worry about safety of self and others (more clingy with teacher or parent/caregiver)
- Worry about recurrence of violence/event
- Increased distress (unusually whiny, irritable, moody)
- Changes in behavior: increased activity level, decreased attention/concentration, withdrawal from others or activities, angry outbursts or aggression, absenteeism
- Distrust of others, affection interactions with both adults and peers
- A change in ability to interpret and respond appropriately to social cues
- Increased somatic complaints (e.g. headaches, stomachaches, overreaction to minor bumps and bruises)
- Changes in school performance
- Recreating the event (e.g. repeatedly talking about, “playing out”, or drawing the event)
- Over- or under-reacting to bells, physical contact, doors slamming, sirens, lighting, sudden movements
- Statements and questions about death/dying
- Difficulty with authority, redirection, or criticism
- Re-experiencing the trauma (e.g. nightmares or disturbing memories through the day)
- Hyperarousal (e.g. sleep disturbance, tendency to be easily startled)
- Avoidance behaviors (e.g. resisting going to place that remind or could remind them of the event)
- Emotional numbing (e.g. seeming to have no feelings about the event)

# Signs of Emotional Dysregulation



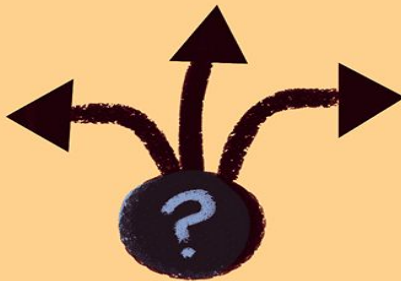
Overly intense emotions



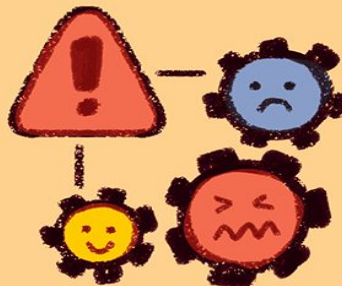
Impulsive behavior



Lack of emotional awareness



Trouble making decisions



Inability to manage behavior

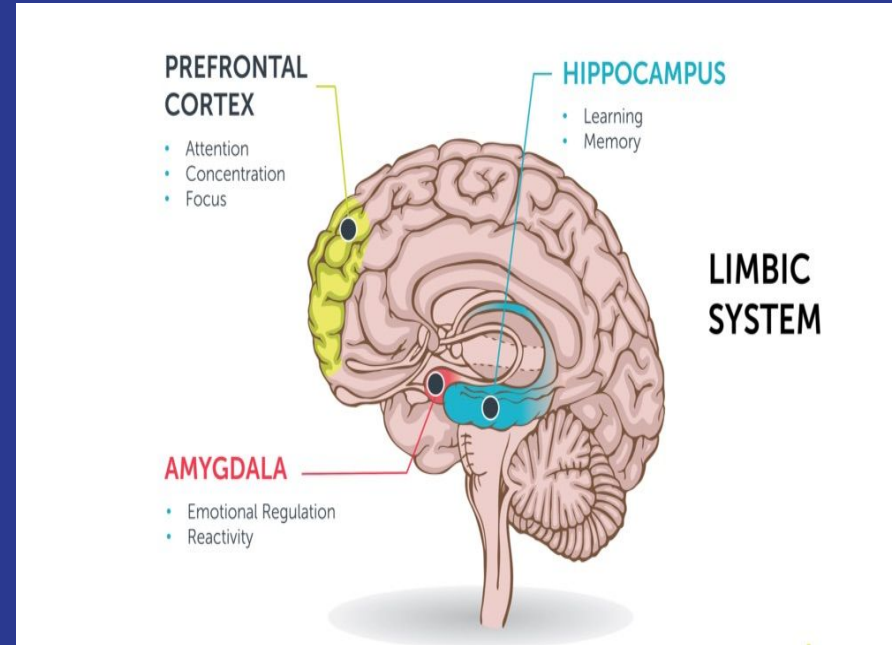


Avoids difficult emotions

# How does Trauma affect the brain?

Each child has a different emotional response to a traumatic event; the brain's response will also vary between children.

- Amygdala (detect/react)
- Medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC) (controls)
  - Hippocampus (learning/memory)





# Understanding the Brain

Hand Brain Model, Dr. Dan Siegal



## Survival Brain

Sensation

Autonomic functions

Survival strategies:

fight, flight,  
freeze, submit,  
& collapse

## Emotional Brain

Expression/  
regulation of  
feeling

Memories

relationships/  
attachment

## Amygdala

Smoke alarm

## Thinking Brain

Critical thinking

Problem solving,

planning,

creativity,

beliefs, impulse

control

## Offline Brain

Survival brain

in control

Not able to

access the

thinking brain.



Children's Home Society

# HOW THE NERVOUS SYSTEM RESPONDS TO TRAUMA

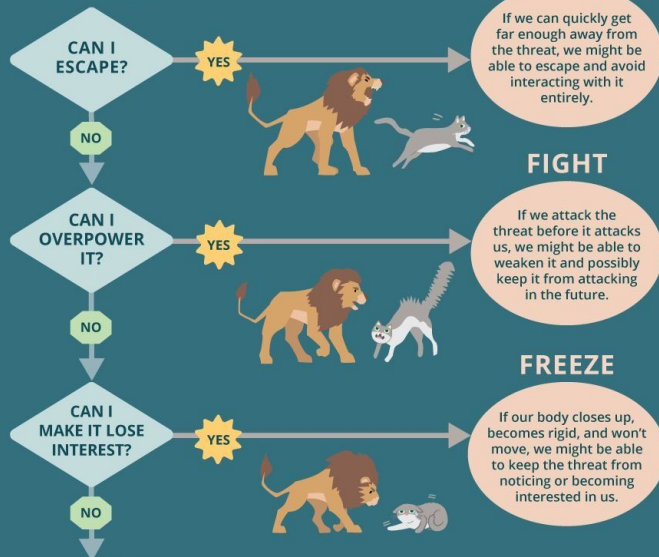
Adapted from *Ruth Lanius, MD, PhD*

How does your nervous system figure out how to respond in a crisis?

It's a split-second, unconscious process designed to choose the best option for keeping you safe.

Here's how it works:

## IDENTIFY THE THREAT



## FLEE

If we can quickly get far enough away from the threat, we might be able to escape and avoid interacting with it entirely.

## FIGHT

If we attack the threat before it attacks us, we might be able to weaken it and possibly keep it from attacking in the future.

## FREEZE

If our body closes up, becomes rigid, and won't move, we might be able to keep the threat from noticing or becoming interested in us.

## COLLAPSE

If our mind/brain disconnects from our body, like by dissociating, or in some cases by fainting, we might be able to avoid feeling as much of the pain.



In the face of threat, there isn't time to try every approach. In fact, your nervous system has to make these choices almost instantaneously. So while you may not understand the choice, or agree with it afterward, it's important to know that your body is taking care of you the best it knows how.

# Learning Brain VS. Survival Brain

Learning brain is characterized as being open to new information, comfortable with ambiguity, and emotionally calm, peaceful, excited about learning, curious, and not afraid of making mistakes.

Survival brain is the opposite: hyper focused on threat, doesn't like ambiguity, thinks in black and white.

[Understanding Trauma: Learning Brain vs Survival Brain](#) (4:58)



**Trauma can impact school performance.**

**Trauma can impair learning.**

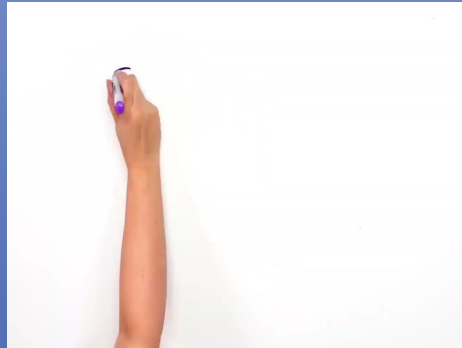
**Traumatized children may experience physical and emotional distress.**

**Students who have experienced traumatic events may have behavioral or academic problems or their suffering may not be apparent at all.**

# ACEs

Adverse Childhood Experiences

[Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\): Impact on brain, body and behaviour](#)



## 5 Strategies for Managing Your Emotions in the Classroom:

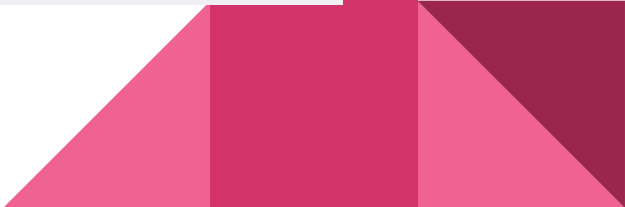
**Identify your stress responses:** Monitor our own body's signals. Before we have an emotional response, our nervous system will send physical sensations through our bodies to prepare it to fight, flight or freeze.

**Use a sensory regulatory practice:** While our reactions to stress can be physical, so can our responses to try to remain calm. We can actually use movement and [sensory practices to help calm our nervous system](#).



**Reframe your thoughts:** Our immediate reactions are often biased and our bodies are often filled with anxiety. So it causes us to respond irrationally. (Show next slide)

**Use Focused-Attention Practices:** Like sensory regulation practices, focused-attention practices can help us when we're dysregulated. [100 Focused Attention Practices](#).

**Continue to Practice Awareness—Every Day:** Mindfulness is a skill that we develop over time. It's important to implement these practices even when we're not feeling stressed or overwhelmed.



# ADULT NERVOUS SYSTEM CHART

What I say to myself  VS. What is occurring in my thoughts 

## MY WORLD

What I say to myself (worries, shame, guilt, and anxiety provoking thoughts and feelings)

This student is pushing all my buttons and I have no control! I am helpless to do anything.

I am feeling so disrespected by these students. How am I supposed to teach 30 students when I cannot get anyone's attention, and everyone is clowning around and acting up? This feels hopeless and unending!

## PRESENT MOMENT

What is occurring without my interfering thoughts, feelings, and perceptions.

This student is having a hard time and I am observing a very dysregulated nervous system and a brain in pain! I can remember to not personalize this behavior as this is not about me! I can try to find some of my own calm to share with her, validating her feelings. I know that with some time and space, we can talk through this! In all moments, we can repair after a rupture.

In this moment, the only one or thing I can control is myself! My students are showing how they feel through their dysregulated nervous systems. I can ONLY control my nervous system. I can take some deep breaths, grab some water, and start over by sharing my calm emotionally available presence with these students. Maybe we stop what we're doing and read a book together, watch a video and guess the ending, or draw and listen to music for a few minutes.

# Top 10 De-escalation Tips:

Tip 1: Be empathetic and nonjudgmental- Try not to judge or discount their feelings.

Tip 2: Respect personal space- Stand 1.5 to 3 feet away.

Tip 3: Use non threatening nonverbals- Tone is everything and body language.

Tip 4: Avoid overreacting- Remain calm and rational.

Tip 5: Focus on feelings- Listen for feeling words.

Tip 6: Ignore challenging questions- Ignore the challenge, but not the person.

Tip 7: Set limits- Offer choices.

Tip 8: Choose wisely what you insist upon- Be flexible.

Tip 9: Allow silence for reflection- Silence is a powerful communication tool.

Tip 10: Allow time for decisions- Allowing time brings calmness.

## SOME THINGS WE CAN REMIND OURSELVES OF BEFORE RESPONDING TO A CHILD WHO IS "ACTING OUT"

- ❑ I will take **deep breaths** to calm and center myself.
- ❑ I am the adult and **captain** of this ship.
- ❑ They are **doing the best that they can**, given the skills and resources that they have in this very moment.
- ❑ Their **prefrontal cortex is not fully developed yet**.  
(Won't be until they are in their mid-twenties!) Their brain is only 9 (or 4 or 16 or 13 or 7) years old.
- ❑ Their **Protective Brain** (amygdala) is directing them right now.
- ❑ I choose to respond with **kindness & compassion**, like the **WARRIOR** that I am.



# What can we do?

[3 Trauma-Informed Practices Backed By Science](#)

[Teaching Self-Regulation by Modeling](#)

[PBIS- 4 De-Escalation Strategies](#)

[PBIS TRIP Guide: De-Escalating Problem Behavior](#)

[Sloth Breaths](#)

[Daily Affirmations by Snoop Dogg](#)

[5, 4, 3, 2,1 Grounding Technique](#)



# Resources

[What is trauma? The author of “The Body Keeps the Score” explains | Bessel van der Kolk | Big Think](#) Bessel van der Kolk-  
What is trauma?

[Understanding Trauma: Learning Brain vs Survival Brain](#) Understanding Trauma: Learning Brain vs Survival Brain

[3 Trauma-Informed Practices Backed By Science](#) 3 Trauma-Informed Practices Backed By Science

[Fast Facts: Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences | Violence Prevention|Injury Center|CDC](#) ACEs Fast Facts

[STRESS & EARLY BRAIN GROWTH Understanding Adverse Childhood Experiences \(ACEs\)](#) STRESS & EARLY BRAIN

GROWTH: Understanding Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

[Teaching Self-Regulation Skills in the Classroom: A 3-Step Approach](#) Teaching Self-regulation in the classroom

[Emotional Self-Management: 8 Tips for Educators | Learning Sciences International](#) Emotional Self-Management: 8

Tips for Educators to Self-Regulate and Co-Regulate Emotions and Behaviors

[Teaching Self-Regulation by Modeling](#) Teaching Self-Regulation by Modeling

[Survival Responses Handout](#)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T65M1VxJIT0>

Sloth Breaths

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PGFBxoWqOV0>

Daily Affirmations Pt 1 (Snoop Dogg)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Y9t65JDJhI>

5,4,3,2,1 Grounding Technique

CPI with Dr. Lori Desautels, June 13, 2023 ([Regulating our Emotions in the Classroom: Practical Tips for Educators](#))

Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators | October 2008-The National Child Traumatic Stress Network [www.NCTSN.org](http://www.NCTSN.org)

<https://cte.openlcc.net/400-words/learning-brains-vs-survival-brains/>

<chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://tfcbt.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Trauma-and-the-Brain-Handout-2014.pdf>

<https://earlyconnections.mo.gov/professionals/trauma-informed-care>

Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators | October 2008 - The National Child Traumatic Stress Network [www.NCTSN.org](http://www.NCTSN.org)