

Suggestions and resources for school staff
for supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait
Islander children who
have experienced
trauma



SCENARIO

Jessica finds it hard to get to school each day. She often feels tired, has difficulty concentrating in class and doesn't enjoy being at school. Jessica also feels socially isolated from her peers and she just can't keep up with all the tasks her teacher asks her to complete. Sometimes she feels really frustrated about this but it's hard to find the words to explain what is wrong. Things at home have been difficult too and it's hard not to think about home when she's at school. Overall, Jessica doesn't feel very happy at school or at home although she does enjoy spending time with her Grandpa at the weekends.

Anne is a new teacher to the school and is struggling with Jessica, whom she finds very disruptive. She sees Jessica as argumentative and continually disrupting the class with her aggressive behaviour. Jessica is also frequently moody, and 'flies off the handle' for no obvious reason.

Anne has recently felt a lot of additional pressure because some of the parents of children in the class have requested that Jessica be removed from the classroom so that their own children can learn without disruption. Anne can understand how they are feeling but really wants the best outcomes for all the children in her care.

Anne has confided in another teacher, who has told her that Jessica is dealing with a lot of trauma within her family and that the trauma is ongoing.

Anne admits to not knowing much about Jessica's family situation nor the impacts of trauma more broadly. Anne is concerned about the long term impacts on Jessica's mental health and wellbeing and learning. She is also concerned about her own capacity to manage an increasingly difficult environment for herself and the other students. Anne is aware that her levels of stress and struggles with coping will only make matters worse for herself, Jessica and the other children in the class.

How school staff can help

Get to know about culturally appropriate communication

Learning more about culturally appropriate communication can help school staff approach a child's family if they notice something is going on for a student. When school staff are aware that respectful ways of communicating (for example body language, eye contact) for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may be different from their own culture, it can be easier for them to talk with families about difficult topics (like trauma¹).

Find out more about cultural aspects of trauma

Learning more about what trauma can mean for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, families and communities means that school staff can be equipped to recognise the signs of trauma, and support children and families in ways that are culturally appropriate.¹

Don't shame the child, their family or community

Shame is an important concept in many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. It is very important that school staff don't shame a child, their family or community because it can prevent them from seeking and receiving support when they need it.¹ Feeling shame can also trigger memories of trauma for children and of trauma their families have experienced in the past (for more information, see *Intergenerational trauma* under the *Different types of trauma* section of Information Sheet 2 of this series). Sometimes this can result in children being reluctant to come to school, or not coming to school at all because the school isn't seen as a place that acknowledges culture and connection to country. When school staff are aware of the kind of language and behaviour that can cause children, families and communities to feel shame, re-triggering of intergenerational trauma is more likely to be avoided.

¹ Orygen Youth Health Research Centre, University of Melbourne, & beyondblue. (2008). *Cultural considerations and communication techniques: Guidelines for providing Mental Health First Aid to an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person*. Melbourne: Authors. Accessed January 2014 from http://www.mhfa.com.au/cms/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/AMHFA_Cultural_guidelines_email_2012.pdf

Taking care of yourself

When reading this resource, remember it is important to take care of yourself.

Tune into how you're feeling and reacting to the content, and identify a place you can get support if you need to.

Resources for school staff

- The Australian Childhood Foundation. (2010). *Making SPACE for learning: Trauma informed practice in schools*. Melbourne: Author. www.childhood.org.au
- Downey, L. (2007). *Calmer classrooms: A guide to working with traumatised children*. Melbourne: Child Safety Commissioner.
- Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC). (2011). *Growing up our way: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child rearing: Practices matrix*. Melbourne: Author.

Use trauma-informed practice in the classroom

Another way school staff can support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who have experienced trauma is to use trauma-informed practice in the classroom. The practices in the table opposite are recommended to support students who have experienced trauma.²

Active empowerment: Seek out and use community and family supports

Helping Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families who have experienced trauma to build a support network is very important. Support networks could involve community Elders, Aboriginal liaison support workers at school, or anyone that children and families respect and trust. When children and families have a support network, they can turn to those people and organisations for culturally appropriate support or assistance when they need it.¹ This could include providing opportunities for community Elders and support workers to be actively engaged with school events through welcoming ceremonies to promote inclusion.

² Downey, L. (2007). *Calmer classrooms: A guide to working with traumatised children*. Melbourne: Child Safety Commissioner. Accessed January 2014 from http://www.cryp.vic.gov.au/childsafetycommissioner/downloads/calmer_classrooms.pdf

TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICE

Connect with children and help them to connect with others:

Experiencing trauma can be very isolating. It's often hard to connect at first with children who have experienced trauma. Sometimes consistent attempts to engage them are needed. Helping children to connect and develop relationships with others at school is also really important.

Help children to comply with requests: Children who have experienced trauma don't always necessarily want to please adults, so offering assistance to complete tasks can help to avoid 'battles of will'.

Help children to tell their story: Children who have experienced trauma often don't have a vocabulary to talk about what happened to them. Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) can help children develop a language to tell their story to others. Telling their story to others can help children process what they have experienced and find meaning in it.

Establish safety in the classroom: Making school a safe place to come is essential. When children feel safe it's easier for them to learn and to develop safe, trusting relationships with others. Developing safe working relationships with families can make children feel even more secure at school.

Have structure and consistency in the classroom: Children who have experienced trauma often respond well to set boundaries and consequences that are applied with sensitivity to their needs.

Use natural consequences: Consequences that follow naturally from the unwanted behaviour work better than any school punishment. If property or relationships have been damaged, focus on outcomes that aim to fix these.

Acknowledge good decisions: Commending positive behaviour as opposed to personality characteristics can be a good strategy, as some children who have experienced trauma may not respond well to praise.



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