

Prevention Through Education

Read-Ahead Materials for the US Prevention Practitioners Network

Background - the US Prevention Practitioners Network

Since October 2020, [the McCain Institute](#), with support from [the Institute for Strategic Dialogue](#) (ISD) and a steering committee of violence prevention and social safety experts, have been developing and engaging a [US practitioners network](#) for individuals working in **targeted violence and terrorism prevention (TVTP)**. The aim of this is not only to connect practitioners across the US with one another, but also to build their capacity and the efficacy of their programs through a series of workshops that cover both theoretical and practical elements of delivering prevention and intervention initiatives. This information pack is for the twelfth workshop being delivered for the emerging network, and covers **prevention through education**.

Why the topic of prevention through education?

This document focuses on the role of schools and educators in preventing targeted violence and other harmful behaviors, recognizing that educational institutions are a vital component of the "whole-of-society" approach to TVTP that is [globally recognized](#) as good practice. Among others, educational institutions can offer students positive role models in the form of teachers, sports coaches, supervisors for after school clubs, school counselors and nurses, and provide children with a safe space in which to develop and pursue interests and aspirations. Schools can serve as and strengthen the protective factors that insulate a child's resilience to violent and otherwise harmful narratives, thinking and behavior. The role of education (and educators) in prevention is recognized by TVTP stakeholders across the world, with the UN and other multilateral institutions [encouraging](#) a role for education in local and national approaches to TVTP.

What is the purpose of this document?

This information pack serves as an entry-level resource for educators and other practitioners that seek to know more about the role of educators and education in TVTP. It explores:

- the role of educators in prevention;
- key definitions related to early childhood and inter-generational trauma;
- the impact of trauma on children;
- concerning behaviors and risk factors that educators should be cognizant of;
- protective factors;
- what educators can do to buffer these protective factors;
- two examples of related initiatives in and for schools;
- further reading recommendations.

Importantly, this document uses the term "educators" to refer to a range of school-based staff, including teachers, sports coaches, counselors, nurses, principles and others. The term "children" is used to refer to any young person up to the age of 18.

Documents like this one are provided ahead of every workshop. Past documents and workshop recordings can be [found here](#). For any inquiries, please contact [the McCain Institute](#) or [ISD](#).

BACKGROUND - THE ROLE OF EDUCATORS IN PREVENTION

In the past decade, international and national discourse around and strategies for countering terrorism and targeted violence have shifted from heavily-securitized approaches to a focus on softer multi-disciplinary measures centered on building resilience against and addressing the root causes of hate, polarization and targeted violence. Educators play a vital role in this "whole-of-society" approach, by virtue of their direct and daily interface with young people, who are in formative periods of their lives, when they form perceptions around their own identity and the identity of others, and are generally easily influenced by the social and environmental inputs they are exposed to. Among others, educators can:



Did You Know?

The UN's 2015 [Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism](#) encourages member states to "invest in education... to ensure all children have access to inclusive, high-quality education."



Reinforce pro-social values and facilitate an inclusive classroom environment: with their daily interaction with the children they teach, and the position of "influence" they may hold over their students, teachers, sports coaches, school club leaders and other school staff are well-placed to reinforce positive values such as respect for human rights and appreciation for cultural similarities and differences. Educators can also create environments that foster inclusion and connectivity, which mitigate against feelings of non-belonging and social exclusion, both of which may make a young person more susceptible to harmful narratives and behaviors.



Identify concerning behaviors and responding accordingly: with the right support and training, teachers and school staff more widely can be empowered to identify concerning behaviors and respond accordingly, facilitating the necessary support for the child by referring them to the appropriate services and thus mitigating against escalations in concerning behavior (e.g., to violence). Teachers can also directly support behavioral assessment and management (should a child's behavior require this) by providing relevant practitioners - a youth or social worker, for example - insight into the child's behavior in a school setting, their academic strengths and potential areas for concern, whether that's truancy or their engagement with peers.



Provide trauma-informed teaching and care: teachers, school counselors, school nurses, sports coaches and other school staff are also in position to identify signs of trauma amongst their students. Trauma-informed teaching can help children who are experiencing or have experienced trauma feel safe in schools, connected to their peers and build positive relationships that can mitigate against the long-term harms of trauma, including social anxiety, general feelings of fear and insecurity, and self-enforced isolation from friends and others.



Create a safe space in which to discuss difficult topics, like identity-based hate and discrimination: teachers that are sensitized to issues of identity-based hate and bias, like racism, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and others, can provide their students with a forum in which to discuss this, particularly the impact it has on society and on targeted individuals.



Teach students about digital literacy and digital citizenship: educators can also provide young people with practical guidance on how to recognize and report online hate crimes, how to stay safe online, how to fact-check sources and good cybersecurity practice more broadly. This is

particularly pressing light of the sheer penetration rate of social media amongst young people; over [90% of 13-17-year-olds](#) in the US are thought to be on social media, for example. Strong digital literacy skills can build a child's resilience against disinformation, conspiracy theories, extremist recruitment and other mal-intended behavior online.

Educators ultimately play a multi-faceted role in preventing targeted violence and terrorism. This information pack explores some of the above roles in greater detail, focusing specifically on considerations for addressing early childhood and inter-generational trauma, responding to concerning behaviors, protective factors and examples of school-based violence prevention programs. Per the guidance on [Page 1](#) of this information pack, this document serves as a primer for the PPN's Summer Symposium, discussions from which will be combined with the contents of this document to produce a practice guide for educators that seek to learn more about and achieve their role in prevention.



EARLY CHILDHOOD AND INTER-GENERATIONAL TRAUMA

Trauma, particularly trauma that is unaddressed, can have a devastating and long-term impact on children and adolescents. Whether it is a result of domestic abuse, neglect or one-time exposure to events like natural disasters, trauma has developmental, psychological and social consequences. Among others, it can leave children feeling distrustful of adults and of their peers; finding it difficult to understand and regulate their emotions, potentially resulting in violent outbursts; unable to form meaningful relationships, causing them to be socially isolated or easily exploited by others; make them hypervigilant, and filling their minds with negative self-talk and thinking.

This section provides key definitions related to childhood trauma, provides an overview of the impact of trauma on children, and explores how educational institutions, particularly teachers and school counselors, can support traumatized children by providing a safe space, building trust and confidence, and helping them integrate with their peers.

KEY DEFINITIONS

- **Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE):** ACEs refer to ["potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood"](#), and can range from experiencing or witnessing abuse to being in a home environment where someone - a parent/guardian or sibling, for example - struggles with substance abuse or suicide ideation. According to a [survey](#) by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), 61% of respondents across 25 states reported experienced an ACE by the time they were 18, with about 17% reporting they experienced at least four.
- **Trauma:** refers to the ["physical, cognitive and emotional response"](#) to an event, series of events or set of circumstances that make the individual(s) concerned feel unsafe, physically, emotionally and/or



Important:

Witnessing abuse can be just as traumatizing as being the target of abuse. This is particularly the case for children, whose perceptions of safety may depend on how they perceive the safety of their parents or guardians, siblings and other individuals they have an attachment to.

mentally threatened or otherwise causes them injury (referred to in this information pack as "traumatic events"). There are [different types](#) of trauma:

- **Acute Trauma:** refers to trauma that results from a single event. This may result from an accident or near-accident, (sexual) assault, a natural disaster, among others.
- **Chronic Trauma:** exposure to prolonged traumatic events. Examples include domestic abuse, bullying, and serious illness.
- **Complex Trauma:** complex trauma involves exposure to multiple, varied traumatic events that are usually interpersonal, where a child, for example, is regularly and directly harmed by another person. This can lead to serious long-term attachment issues and thus impact a child's social and general development.

Some practitioners and trauma-related resources may also refer to:

- **Historical Trauma:** sometimes referred to as "collective trauma," historical trauma results from traumatic experiences ["that are shared by a group of people within a society."](#) Examples [include](#) genocide, war, systematic oppression and economic depression.
- **Inter-Generational Trauma:** when trauma affects or is passed down to subsequent generations. This is sometimes referred to as "multigenerational" or "transgenerational" trauma. Inter-generational trauma can refer to collective or historical trauma that is felt by generations subsequent to those that directly experienced the traumatic event(s), or can refer to trauma that is passed down from a caregiver to a child, for example.
- **Vicarious Trauma:** also known as secondary trauma, this refers to the traumatization of those who are working with individuals that have trauma. This may include social workers, targeted violence intervention providers more broadly, teachers and others.
- **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):** refers to an anxiety disorder that can result from living through or witnessing traumatic events. Symptoms include re-experiencing the trauma, usually in the form of flashbacks, painful memories or nightmares, being triggered and reminded of the traumatic event(s) by different sensory inputs, hypervigilance, lack of sleep, among others.

What's the Difference?

"Historical trauma" and "inter-generational trauma" are sometimes used interchangeably. The Administration for Children and Families, however, [positions](#) the former as a subtype of the latter that is experienced by a "specific cultural group" and that often involves "damage to a cultural identity."

THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA ON CHILDREN AND THE ROLE OF EDUCATORS:

The impact of trauma, whether it is acute, chronic or complex, cannot be understated. Unaddressed trauma can significantly impede on a child's social and cognitive development, and can have long-term consequences that carry into adulthood and that may eventually affect their own children (e.g., inter-generational trauma). Provided are some examples of how trauma can impact children specifically and how educators can account for this as they engage their students. Note that **this is in no way a comprehensive list**, and the impact of trauma (as well as how children express or manifest this impact) varies from child to child. These examples are provided to give practitioners (a) the language to communicate and learn more

about childhood trauma and (b) considerations for how teachers and other educators can support traumatized children.

- **Cognitive:** a traumatized child may struggle to execute basic cognitive functions. They may find it hard to pay attention, retain information, organize themselves, be able to prioritize and manage time, among others. This may result in poor academic performance, truancy and general behavioral issues, as well as a lack of communication and other life skills. Trauma may impact other types of **childhood development**, including physical and emotional.

***What Can Educators Do?** Consider how you can accommodate your teaching style to the needs of a child who may be slower to learn and understand new topics than the rest of the class. Is it feasible to offer one-to-one catch-up sessions after school, for example? Consider also creative approaches (e.g., arts-based) to teaching specific topics.*

- **Emotional / Mental Health:** traumatized children may struggle to regulate their emotions, feeling high levels of emotional distress, fear and insecurity. This may make them hypervigilant, mentally exhausting them and making them unable to fulfill their basic needs. Some children may resort to self-harm or develop other mental health concerns, like eating disorders, as a way to express and manage difficult emotions.

***What Can Educators Do?** Foster a class environment that encourages students to share their feelings. Consider the example you set - by practicing active listening and explicitly showing empathy, traumatized children you oversee may feel more inclined safely express how they are feeling.*

- **Interpersonal:** children that have experienced trauma may struggle to form positive relationships with others. Where children have witnessed or experienced abuse at the hands of an adult, the consequent trauma may make them distrustful of other adults and perceive all adults as threats to their safety and security. This can, in turn, impede on their social and cognitive development, given the importance of adult role models and socializing more broadly in teaching children interpersonal and other soft skills.

***What Can Educators Do?** Foster a class environment that encourages students to share their feelings. Be solutions-oriented in your teaching style. Collaborative problem-solving and discussion as a response to bad behavior (rather than punishment by asking the student to leave the room, for example) may help traumatized children cope better with feedback, difficult emotions and will help build trust.*

- **Social:** similar to the interpersonal consequences, traumatized children may struggle in social situations, choosing to isolate themselves in order to avoid these altogether. This ostracism makes them vulnerable to being exploited by others, and may exacerbate their other trauma symptoms given the lack of exposure to mitigating influences, such as positive role models and healthy peer networks.

***What Can Educators Do?** Create a "safe zone" in your classroom that students can go to should they feel overwhelmed during social/group activities. Consider also the consistency and structure of your lessons. Traumatized children may not be able to handle "surprises" or changes to routine well, for example. When a change to the structure of your classes is necessary, be sure to communicate this to the students proactively to enable traumatized children to prepare mentally.*



Did You Know?

Being mindful of trauma and

adapting your teaching style accordingly is considered a form of **trauma-informed teaching**. At its most basic, this can make students feel cared and accommodated for. It will also enable a teacher-student relationship that is based on understanding and patience, and may help resocialize students that have otherwise withdrawn from the class.

CONCERNING BEHAVIORS, RISK FACTORS, AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

This chapter defines and lists some concerning behaviors and risk factors that may make a student susceptible to violent narratives and influences, as well as protective factors that may buffer an individual's susceptibility to harmful beliefs. **This is not an exhaustive list nor do the listed concerning behaviors and risk factors necessarily suggest a student is on a bad path and/or needs support.**

KEY DEFINITIONS AND EXAMPLES

- **Concerning Behaviors:** [according to the FBI](#), this is "behavior that comes to the attention of third parties (bystanders) that suggests a possible future intention, resulting from a statement or action that causes concern."

Examples of [behaviors](#) that might suggest trauma:

- Isolating themselves from others
- Hypervigilance, especially in social situations, or lethargy
- Increased thinking about death and safety. This may be expressed in different ways, including verbally or visually through drawings, among others
- General irritability, being quick to anger and seemingly unable to process or regulate strong emotions

Examples of behaviors that might suggest trauma radicalization to violent or otherwise harmful beliefs:

- Unwilling to engage students that they consider different
- Becoming abusive to students they consider different
- Refusing to listen to different perspectives and beliefs, and becoming increasingly argumentative when exposed to different perspectives and beliefs
- Using racial, ethnic, misogynistic and other slurs
- Verbal and physical "othering", dehumanization or mocking of individuals of different ethnic and/or religious backgrounds, gender and gender identity, sexual orientation, etc.
- Verbal or physical behavior that suggests a normalization of or propensity towards violence

Good to Know:

There are different guides and resources online to help educators identify and respond to concerning behaviors. This includes general resources around supporting traumatized children, and resources that list potential critical warning signs that a situation may escalate to violence. [Sandy Hook Promise](#), for example, provides a non-exhaustive list of potential warning signs of violence, which include:

1. Suddenly withdrawing from friends, family and activities
2. Bullying, especially if targeted towards differences in race, religion, gender or sexual orientation
3. Excessive irritability, lack of patience, or becoming angry quickly
4. Experiencing chronic loneliness or social isolation
5. Expressing persistent thoughts of harming themselves or someone else
6. Making direct threats towards a place, another person or themselves
7. Bragging about access to guns or weapons
8. Recruiting accomplices or audiences for an attack
9. Directly expressing a threat as a plan

Educational institutions should support their staff with staying abreast of these resources. This can be done through regular trainings, incorporating this into professional development strategies, or distributing relevant resources through an intra-school newsletter, for example.

For more resources and further reading material, please see [Appendix 1](#).

- **Risk Factors:** Factors that may "increase the likelihood of the outcome being measured occurring". In the case of this document, these are environmental, social, interpersonal and other circumstances that may be exploited by others for bad intent, and may impede on an individual's resilience to violent/harmful narratives and behaviors.

Examples of risk factors may include:

- Poor coping skills
- Unhealthy, dangerous or a lack of personal relationships
- Consistent history of truancy
- Lack of academic or extracurricular interests
- **"Leakage"**, which is when "a student intentionally or unintentionally reveals clues to feelings, thoughts, fantasies, attitudes, or intentions that signal an impending act. These clues can take the form of subtle threats, boasts, innuendos, predictions, or ultimatums." They can be conveyed in numerous forms (e.g., stories, diaries, journals, essays, poems, manifestos, letters, songs, drawings, and videos).
- **Protective Factors:** Protective factors "insulate or buffer an individual's resilience" to radicalization and violence.

Examples of protective factors may include:

- Feeling connected to the class, teacher and other school staff
- Having healthy personal relationships and positive role models
- Strong commitment to academic and extra-curricular interests

Good to Know:

Some TVTP practitioners and behavioral specialists categorize risk and protective factors into different subtypes. This may include:

- | | |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Static
<i>Examples include age, criminal history, trauma history</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpersonal/Relational
<i>Examples include social networks, peer-to-peer engagement, engagement with adults (parents, guardians, educators, other school staff), whether they are socially excluded or integrated</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dynamic
<i>This may include attitudinal factors (e.g., concerning behaviors), coping mechanisms, substance abuse</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational/Vocational
<i>In children, this considers academic performance and attendance</i> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Environmental
<i>This refers to considerations around a child's home or school environment, potentially triggering events or sensory inputs (especially for traumatized children)</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capability
<i>This considers whether a child has access to means for self-harm or harm to others (e.g., access to firearms)</i> |

For more information, see past **practice guides and information packs** on behavioral assessment and management, which were produced for the PPN by ISD and the McCain Institute. While these are intended more for multi-disciplinary TVTP intervention teams, they may provide useful context for educators about how behavioral assessment is considered in the specific context of TVTP.

WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO?

Educators and educational institutions can help strengthen students' protective factors by creating a safe school environment in which all students feel included and connected to the school's "identity". This section provides a brief overview of things schools can do to promote a safe climate, strengthen protective factors and otherwise support the prevention of targeted violence. This is for informational purposes only, and the McCain Institute, ISD and PPN Steering Committee recognize that some schools already incorporate this, while others may struggle to do so due to a lack of staffing, financial and other resources.



Teach digital literacy and citizenship:

With over 90% of 13-17-year-olds thought to be on social media, and the increasingly young age at which children digitalize, teaching children digital skills is an essential step in making children feel safe, act responsibly and think critically online. This may cover topics like:

- Fact-checking, source-checking and identifying misinformation and false content
- How to set up two-factor authentication
- How to report cyberbullying and other inappropriate behavior
- Understanding digital echo chambers and filter bubbles, and how this might impact an individual's beliefs

Educators can also play an important role in encouraging students to speak up about distressing content and behavior they see (or are subject to) online.



Teach soft skills around communication, empathy, leadership, teamwork, critical-thinking:

By setting examples of empathy and promoting a collaborative school environment, teachers, sports coaches, school counselors and others can make students feel listened to and empowered.



Offer creative (e.g., performing or visual arts), sports-based and other extra-curricular activities:

After school programs and clubs are a great way to keep children engaged in safe and fun activities. Team-based activities can help build pro-social skills, team-oriented and strategic thinking, and develop positive social networks outside of the classroom environment. Club leads, sports coaches and other staff involved can also serve as positive role models for the children they oversee, setting examples of inclusivity by ensuring all participating students are given opportunity to learn the skills being taught as part of that activity, for example.



Offer one-to-one mentoring:

Mentoring can help give children positive role models, build positive relationships, develop social skills and positive aspirations. Mentoring can be particularly helpful for students who are (or feel they are) falling behind the rest of their peers, and for students with trauma that have otherwise withdrawn from social interaction.



Build the capacity of teachers to broach difficult topics like identity-based hate:

School boards and management can help facilitate training for teachers on how to broach topics like identity-based hate. Alternatively, relevant cross-grade school staff (e.g., principals, counselors) can facilitate the distribution of relevant resources amongst school staff through,

for example, a monthly newsletter or regularly convening staff to discuss challenges with addressing this topic. Many organizations that are expert in targeted violence already have comprehensive and accessible resources that teachers can use to learn more about these phenomena. Examples include the [Anti-Defamation League](#) (ADL), [Southern Poverty Law Center](#), (SPLC), [Polarization and Extremism Research Innovation Lab](#) (PERIL), among others.



Raise awareness about existing capacities within the school for behavioral assessment and management, and/or external services where teachers can refer children they are concerned about:

Schools should also make sure their staff know the services they can leverage both internally and externally to support students they are concerned about. Some schools might have a behavioral intervention team based in the school and made up of different [school-based](#) professionals, others might rely on local community-based teams. Knowing exactly who to contact, how and when will help ensure students get the support they need in a timely and efficient manner.

WHAT ARE SCHOOLS DOING? CASE STUDIES

Fall-Hamilton Elementary School, Nashville -

Fall-Hamilton Elementary School takes a "whole school" approach to providing trauma-informed teaching. This [includes](#):

- focusing on building positive and constructive relationships between different "members" of the school (staff-student, staff-staff, mentor-mentee, student-student)
- incorporating social and emotional learning
- employing a full-time trauma-informed practitioner
- the establishment of "peace corners" in every room, where children can go if they feel overwhelmed or otherwise need space from their peers
- identification and additional, catered support for individuals who need extra assistance
- a tap-in/tap-out system for teachers, where teachers can call on their peers when they need to step back from their classroom / students due to feeling overwhelmed, thus mitigating against phenomena like vicarious trauma

HEARTS, San Francisco -

HEARTS is also a "whole school" approach to addressing trauma ["at the student level, staff level and student organizational level."](#) HEARTS is dedicated to building the capacity of schools in trauma-informed educational practice. This includes the establishment of a multi-tiered system of support that includes:

- primary prevention, where school staff are trained on "trauma-informed, socially-just and anti-racist" practices, restorative practice, how to address vicarious trauma and staff burnout, among others;
- early/secondary intervention, where designated "care teams" provide trauma-informed support for "at-risk" students;
- intensive/tertiary intervention, which includes crisis management and trauma-informed psychosocial care for specific students.

Did You Know?

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network has a [comprehensive framework](#) for developing and sustaining trauma-informed practice in schools. This covers topics from crisis response to disciplinary policies.

APPENDIX ONE - FURTHER READING

In addition to the sources hyperlinked to throughout this information pack, we recommended the following resources.

Early Childhood and Inter-Generational Trauma

- [Fast Facts: Preventing Adverse Childhood Experiences](#)
by the Center for Disease Control (CDC)
- [What is a Traumatic Event?](#)
by the CDC
- [6 Guiding Principles to a Trauma-Informed Approach](#)
by the CDC
- [Trauma Types](#)
by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN)
- [Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators](#)
by the NCTSN
- [Interrupting the inter-generational trauma of family violence](#)
by Judith McMullen for the Marquette University Law School
- [What is Trauma-Informed Teaching?](#)
by Crisis Prevention Institute
- [Trauma-Informed Teaching Strategies](#)
by ASCD
- [Supporting Brain Development in Traumatized Children and Youth](#)
by the Child Welfare Information Gateway
- [Hidden burdens: A review of intergenerational, historical and complex trauma, implications for indigenous families](#)
by Linda O'Neill, Tina Fraser, Andrew Kitchenmann, Verna McDonald for the Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma

Prevention through Education

- [Preventing Violent Extremism in Schools](#)
by the FBI's Office of Partner Engagement
- [A Teacher's Guide on the Prevention of Violent Extremism](#)
by UNESCO
- [A Comprehensive School Safety Framework](#)
by NIJ



APPENDIX ONE - FURTHER READING

- [Understanding School Violence, School-Based Violence Prevention](#) and [Technical Packages for Violence Prevention](#) by the CDC
- [School-Based Violence Prevention: A Practical Handbook](#) by the World Health Organization
- [Foundational Elements of School Safety](#) by the World Health Organization

Teachers' Guides for Digital Literacy and Citizenship Training

- [Digital Citizenship: Programming Toolkit](#) by ISD
- [Be Internet Citizens](#) by YouTube and ISD

Other

- [Resilient Educator](#)
- [Edutopia](#)
- [Child Mind Institute](#)
- [The School Shooter: a threat perspective assessment](#) by the FBI
- [Protective Factors](#) by FRIENDS
- [Protective Factors](#) by the CDC
- [Risk and Protective Factors](#) by the CDC
- [Mentoring & Youth Violence Prevention](#) by Mentoring

