

# INFO-BRIEF: Trauma-Sensitivity and School Success

## How a Trauma-Sensitive Approach can Improve Academic Outcomes for Students in Temporary Housing

Students in temporary housing often face challenges that go beyond everyday stress and cross the line into toxic stress and trauma.

For many students, **homelessness is a traumatic event** in-and-of itself. In addition to housing instability, students may be facing other chronically stressful and/or traumatic situations such as community violence, domestic abuse, incarceration, or a parent/guardian's untreated mental illness.

Toxic stress and trauma have a negative impact on a student's physical, mental, and emotional health, which can impede his/her ability to focus on learning.

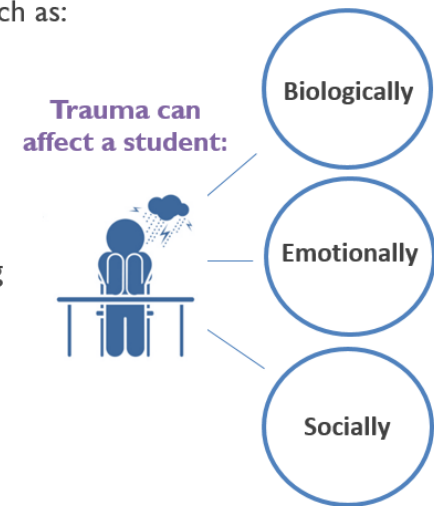
There is a large body of research available that names **trauma-sensitivity** as key in helping traumatized students succeed in school.

This info-brief provides a basic **overview of trauma-sensitivity and how it relates to school success**. It offers examples of the negative impact and behavioral manifestations of trauma as well as strategies for countering those negative impacts through a trauma-sensitive approach. Taking a trauma-sensitive approach can improve a child's self-confidence, resiliency, sense of safety, and ultimately, his/her academic achievement.

### What is Trauma-Sensitivity?

Trauma-sensitivity is an approach, not a "treatment." It can be used by anyone and centers on strategies such as:

- Creating a safe and comforting environment.
- Being empathetic and practicing active listening.
- Avoiding blame or shame.
- Building a partnership, not relying control or authority.
- Focusing on a person's strengths.
- Asking "*what happened to you,*" rather than "*what is wrong with you?*"

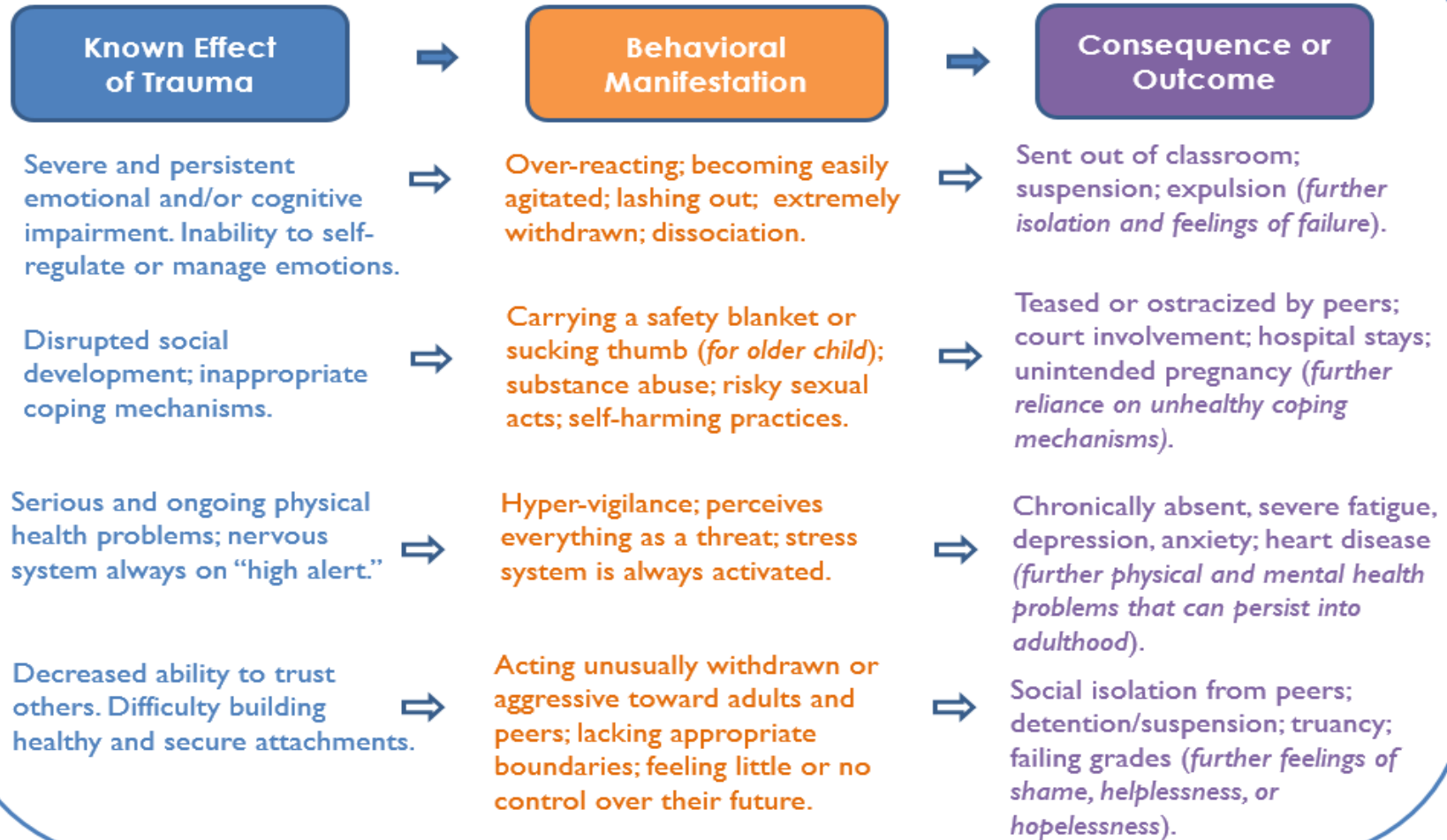


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The following diagram illustrates how **trauma can manifest in a school setting** and how those manifestations can put a student at **higher risk for academic failure**.

## The Impact of Trauma on Students



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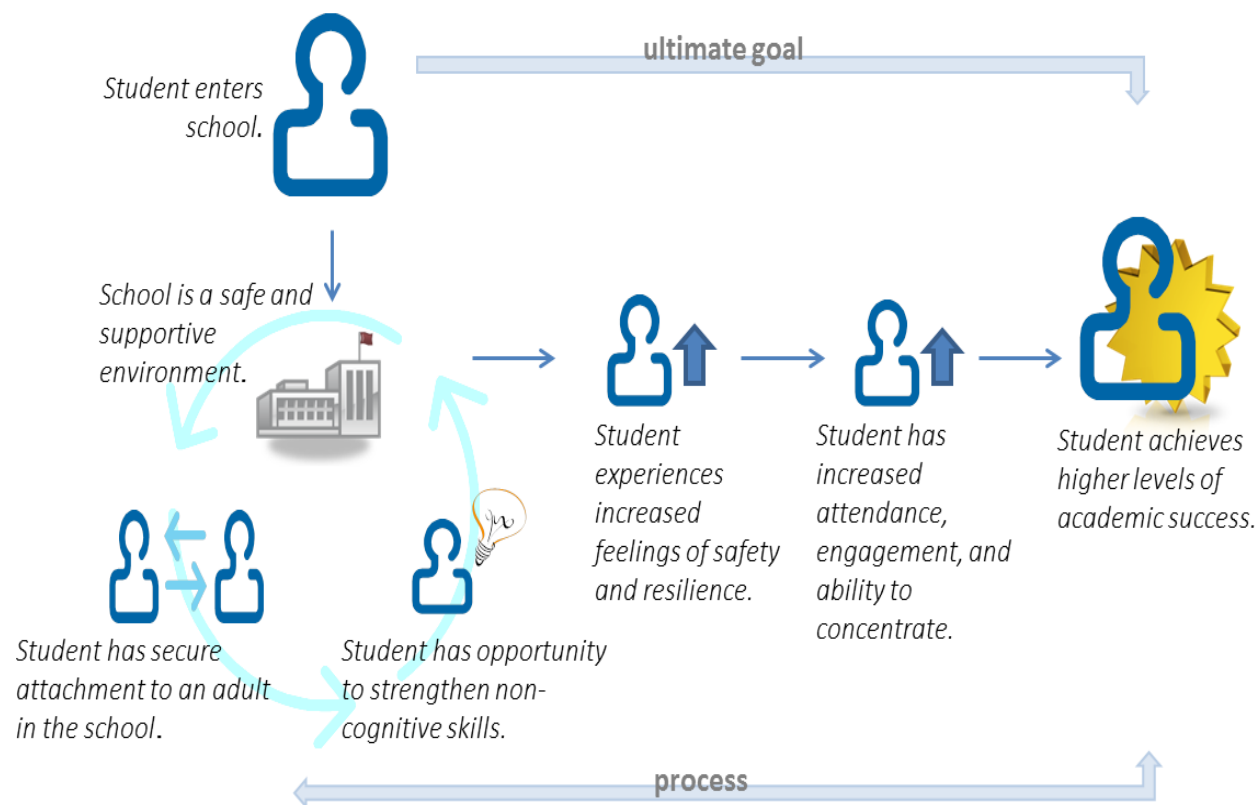
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Traumatic or chronically stressful experiences (i.e. *housing instability*) can cause students to feel so vulnerable, unsafe, and/or distracted in the classroom that they are often unavailable to learn. While there is no “easy” solution for helping students in temporary housing to be successful academically, there are specific trauma-sensitive strategies that can make a positive impact.

**NYS-TEACHS has developed a School Success Framework that is rooted in trauma-sensitive strategies.**

The framework includes three essential elements:

- Creating a Safe and Supportive Environment
- Fostering Secure Attachments
- Strengthening Non-Cognitive Skills (i.e. social-emotional skills)



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The following is a brief overview of the three essential elements of trauma-sensitivity in the context of school success.

**Creating a Safe and Supportive Environment:** It is important to clarify that creating a safe and supportive environment refers to physical, social, and emotional safety. Students need to know that they will be listened to, protected, and taken seriously. A school should strive to provide “*structure and limits that provide a sense of safety through predictable patterns and respectful relationships, with adults in charge who convey confidence – through tone of voice, demeanor, a calm presence during transitions, and in other subtle and overt ways – that they will maintain each student’s feeling of safety in the school.*”<sup>1</sup>

**Fostering Secure Attachments:** Throughout childhood and adolescence, children benefit tremendously from the secure attachments they have with adults. In many cases, the adult is a parent or caregiver, but it doesn’t necessarily have to be. A student can also form a secure attachment to an adult in his/her school. Healthy attachments are critical to success in life and in school because they help children learn to<sup>2</sup>:

- Regulate emotions and self-soothe
- Develop trust in others
- Explore their environment freely
- Understand that they can have an impact on their world

**Strengthening Non-Cognitive Skills (i.e. social-emotional skills):** Non-cognitive skills are critical to the success of a student. They are foundational to a student’s ability to engage, concentrate, and participate, which in turn leads to academic success (i.e. cognitive or hard skills).<sup>3</sup> If a student does not have the skills to process and cope with significant social and/or emotional barriers, those barriers can easily manifest into challenging behavior at school and stop classroom learning in its tracks. The strengthening of non-cognitive skills (i.e. social-emotional learning) refers to:

- Self-management
- Self-awareness and social-awareness
- Responsible decision-making
- Relationship skills
- Social awareness

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<sup>1</sup>“*Helping Traumatized Children Learn (Vol. 2): Creating and Advocating for Trauma-Sensitive Schools*”; Trauma and Learning Policy Institute in collaboration with Massachusetts Advocates For Children; Pg. 21

<sup>2</sup>National Center on Family Homelessness: Ellen Bassuk M.D., Kristine Konnath LISSW, Katherine Volk M.A. (2006): *Understanding Traumatic Stress in Children*.

<sup>3</sup> Nagaoka, Jenny, et al. Voices in Urban Education (2013): *Readiness for College: The Role of Non-cognitive Factors and Context*



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The final diagram in this info-brief illustrates the positive effect of a trauma-sensitive approach on school success.

## The Positive Effects of a Trauma-Sensitive Approach

Trauma-sensitivity is not about treating trauma symptoms themselves, but rather, creating the environment in which a person is...



Made to feel safe and supported both physically and emotionally.



Connected to an adult who approaches them with empathy and understanding.



Empowered and viewed as a strong and resilient individual with strengths to share.

When this happens, students may demonstrate **positive behavioral changes**, such as...

- **Less aggression** (e.g. can identify triggers and follow a plan to cope)
- **Ability to self-regulate** (e.g. breathing deeply to calm oneself down when becoming agitated)
- **Making better decisions** (e.g. coming to school everyday because they see how it will impact their future)
- **Becoming more independent** (e.g. able to make a plan and see it through)
- **Increased self-confidence** (e.g. doesn't self-blame or isolate)
- **Improved relationships** (e.g. able to ask an adult for help when needed)

Visit NYS-TEACHS' **Trauma-Sensitivity and School Success** Resource Library section for more strategies for implementing each of the three elements of the School Success Framework.



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