

Policy Brief – Trauma Informed Education

Over the past 20 years, a [multitude of research](#) from neuroscience, psychology and epidemiology has demonstrated, without question, that exposure to [Adverse Childhood Experiences](#) (ACEs), [trauma](#) (see notes), and [toxic stress](#) adversely affects the health, wellbeing and development of children, young people, families and communities. The harm can seriously impact outcomes in adulthood.

[International studies](#) estimate that approximately two out of every three school-age children have experienced a potentially traumatic event by age 17. Existing evidence in Ireland shows almost [80%](#) of children had experienced at least one adverse life event by age nine.

We know that at least 200,000 children in Ireland are living in homes impacted by alcohol harm; over 2,000 children are living in emergency homeless accommodation; one in five experience child sexual abuse. During 2020, Women's Aid experienced a 43% increase in contacts during 2020 compared with 2019, and a 24% increase in contacts specifically relating to domestic abuse against children.

Ireland has also experienced significant historical and institutional abuses, as well as oppression of particular groups, giving rise to intergenerational trauma in many communities, including the Traveller community. In short, childhood adversity is a reality for far too many children in Ireland.

It is reported that for some children growing up with trauma and toxic stress there may be difficulty forming healthy and stable relationships. They are at increased risk for unstable work histories as adults with increased potential for struggles with finances, jobs, and depression across the lifespan.

[Recent research](#) has indicated significant lasting, negative effects on both physical and mental health, as well as life opportunities such as education and job potential. In fact, childhood adversity is so common and the effects so devastating, it is now considered a global public health epidemic.

There are also [serious financial costs](#) for the exchequer, dealing with issues arising from these problems over the lifespan. In Ireland it is estimated that this is likely to be at least 2% of Gross Domestic Product – a cost that could be offset by investing in prevention and early intervention during a child's life.

Trauma-informed education

Schools are in a unique position to reach large numbers of the population and to interrupt the [negative developmental trajectories](#) associated with trauma. There is [growing](#) consensus globally that educators need to understand the impact of trauma on development, learning and

behaviour. This is important, because without this [knowledge](#), young people's trauma responses can be seen as challenging or disruptive, leading to punitive or confrontational disciplinary procedures and on occasion [exclusion from school](#). This can considerably worsen the overall situation for the child, research demonstrates that one of the biggest protective factors during childhood is education

When educators understand that adversity has a physiological impact on children's development - making it physically and mentally difficult for them to learn or concentrate, causing them to become emotionally dysregulated, hypervigilant or withdrawn - these behaviours in the classroom are looked at in a different way.

Trauma-informed practice in schools does not mean that teachers should do the work of professional therapists, but that they can – and indeed many already do - play a significant role in reducing and mitigating negative outcomes by providing strong, stable, and nurturing relationships and creating environments that offer a felt sense of safety. The work teachers do in this regard is to be commended, but it's important that it is not left to individual teachers to drive cultures and a whole school approach is taken.

A [trauma-informed approach](#) involves first learning about trauma and how it affects children's development, behaviors, learning, and relationships, and then intentionally creating an atmosphere that supports each student, creates a sense of safety and belonging, and nurtures compassion, healing and resilience.

This year's [report](#) from the State's Rapporteur on Child Protection, Professor Conor O'Mahony, highlights a UCC/Alcohol Action Ireland [report](#) calling for training on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) to be implemented at teacher training level.

Progress and political will required

Given the weight of evidence on the human and financial costs associated with childhood adversity, Ireland's progress on translating research into policy has been far too slow. At present, [no policy exists in Ireland](#) that explicitly addresses childhood adversity or offers guidance for organisations on responding to the needs of children exposed to adversity and trauma. This is short sighted in terms of both the personal and wider societal costs.

School-based trauma-informed approaches have been developed and implemented in many countries, including the United Kingdom (traumainformedschools.co.uk), Australia (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2010), Canada (traumasensitiveschoolkit.com), The Netherlands (augeo.nl) and the United States (traumasensitiveschools.org; traumaawareschools.org; traumaandlearning.org).

In contrast, there are no trauma-informed policies to support schools in Ireland.

In order to move the dial on this issue, political support and additional funding is required. Because while adversity is common, children are not irreparably damaged – schools and

teachers (when adequately resourced) are very well placed to mitigate the impact of toxic stress by recognizing it and responding appropriately.

Key Asks

- Development and rollout of a coherent national framework for trauma-informed education.
- Resourcing for teacher professional development in trauma-informed approaches.
- Inclusion of trauma-informed education as a mandatory component of all Initial Teacher Education Programmes.
- Funding for enhanced supports for trauma-affected children, including all schools having access to age-appropriate counselling and psychotherapy (e.g. play & music therapy), and enhanced interagency and departmental co-operation.

ENDS

Notes:

1. SAMHSA defines trauma by discussing “**Three E’s**,” which include:

- An **Event**, series of events, or set of circumstances that is
- **Experienced** by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or threatening, and
- That has lasting adverse **Effects** on the individual’s functioning and physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.

2. Information on a joint Maynooth University/AAI event, is available at the link below. The event aimed to raise awareness of and build capacity for trauma-informed education; it was funded by the Irish Research Council. [Where The Light Enters: Recording Now Available | Maynooth University](#)