



**CLIMATE CONNECTION**

Information and strategies

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# A Trauma-Informed Approach to Family Engagement

Climate Connection is a monthly publication of the NYS Center for School Safety.

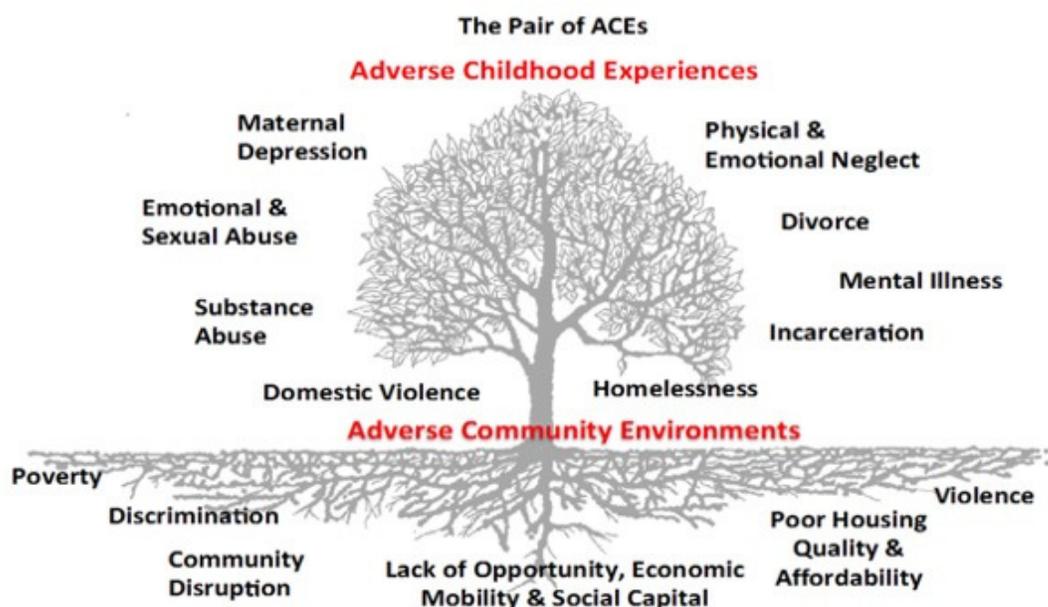
Over the past 20+ years, our collective understanding of trauma and its impact has grown tremendously. It is often a topic of professional development in schools and there are a [multitude of resources](#) dedicated to helping schools be "trauma-informed". Yet, a close examination finds few references to how schools can support and engage families and communities who have been impacted by trauma. To better understand the impact, let's begin with some definitions:

**Intergenerational trauma**, also known as historical trauma, is the transmission of the effects of collective traumatic experiences across generations, such as the Holocaust, slavery, the separation of families at the southern border, and the forced relocation of Native Americans.

**Racial trauma** is the psychological injury (i.e. shame, humiliation, injustice) caused by perceived or real racial bias and/or discrimination. The source of the threat can be an individual, group or system. The attack or threat can occur in-person, be witnessed, or occur in the media, including on social media.

**Systemic trauma** is the action or inaction, often at the policy level, that gives rise to conditions that create inequities in access and opportunities, and lead to overrepresentation of people of color in the criminal justice and child welfare systems.

The impact of racial and systemic trauma is evident in disparities in social determinants of health, such as access to quality education, healthcare, and housing, the safety and quality of neighborhoods, and economic security. When these important resources are lacking in communities, they contribute to and compound the effects of Adverse Childhood Experiences, and are referred to as **Adverse Community Environments**.



Ellis W & Dietz W, A New Framework for Addressing Adverse Childhood and Community Experiences: The Building Community Resilience (BCR) Model, *Academic Pediatrics* (2017).



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Using the 4 key assumptions of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's framework for a [trauma-informed approach](#) (below), schools can implement family engagement practices through a culturally responsive lens that repairs harm and promotes trust in relationships.

**REALIZE** A trauma-informed approach to family engagement begins with an awareness that the adverse childhood experiences we've come to recognize as common among students, often occurs in the context of families (i.e. divorce, domestic violence, or incarceration of a caregiver). Therefore, we realize that trauma is a common experience for families. Furthermore, intergenerational trauma, racial trauma, and systemic trauma contribute to Adverse Community Environments and lead to disparities in many measures of health and well-being for Black, Hispanic/Latinx and Native American communities.

These same types of trauma can elicit feelings of unworthiness, a sense of powerlessness, and mistrust in organizations and systems. Subsequently, this could have a negative impact on school-family relationships. Parents and caregivers may have difficulty engaging and communicating with teachers and staff, which might be misinterpreted as disconnected, resistant or uncooperative.

## RECOGNIZE

**RESPOND** A trauma-informed approach is both family-centered and strengths-based. Focusing on the family's unique needs and attending to what is important to them, builds trust and demonstrates respect. It is also helpful to seek strategic partnerships with community leaders and organizations who can offer diverse perspectives, and give voice to cultural and racial issues or concerns. These relationships help schools better understand the experiences of the community and identify strategies that can repair harm and address inequities.

Be aware that the risk for re-traumatization can be particularly damaging. However, when families feel heard, they will share information they feel necessary. If they choose not to, don't take it personally and respect their privacy. Also, be aware of what is happening in the community and in the media. Reports of hate crimes, police brutality, and community violence may create uncomfortable feelings, anger or avoidance. Practice patience and respond with empathy to promote healing.

## RESIST RE-TRAUMATIZATION

### A CALL TO ACTION:

#### TAKE THESE STEPS TOWARD TRAUMA-INFORMED FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

- 1) Identify the Adverse Community Environments contributing to child, youth & family trauma in your school community. Educate staff about the impact of these conditions, as well as the effects of intergenerational, racial and systemic trauma.
- 2) Identify strategic partners that can provide diverse perspectives and give voice to cultural and racial issues or concerns. Celebrate these partnerships to demonstrate your school's commitment to repairing harm and advancing diversity, equity and inclusion.

