

WHAT EXACTLY IS A

Trauma-Sensitive Classroom?

By Julie Beem, Executive Director, ATN

AN INTERVIEW WITH TWO TRAUMA-INFORMED ELEMENTARY TEACHERS



Trauma-informed care is becoming significantly more important and common in child-serving fields like child welfare, juvenile justice and pediatric medicine. The movement is taking hold in school districts across the country as well. And not a moment too soon!

The movement is fueled by the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) research and the growing understanding of how toxic stress impacts our neurobiology – especially if we’re talking about how trauma changes children’s developing brains. The increase in violence and bullying in schools, the challenges of lowering dropout rates and the number of children coming to school dealing with poverty, neighborhood gangs, domestic violence, family members in jail are all situations where being trauma-sensitive is so very important.

But walk into the office of your local elementary school and ask them “Is this a trauma-sensitive school?” and you’re likely to be met with blank stares.

I asked two veteran trauma-informed teachers to tell me what their trauma-sensitive classrooms look like and what they actually do to help children in their classes who have been traumatized.



Julie Simmons is an early education teacher with degrees in both school social work and early childhood development. Julie has taught preschool and the early grades, and is the parent to 5 beautiful children, the youngest two adopted from China. Julie lives with her children in Texas.



Ilene Pawlak teaches kindergarteners in New Jersey and has been a teacher for over 30 years. Ilene's initial interest in trauma-informing her classroom came through seeing the challenges faced by her friend, a fellow teacher, who had adopted a

son significantly impacted by early trauma. It was then that Ilene's interest in helping children with Developmental Trauma began.

Both are trainers for ATN's Creating Trauma-Sensitive Schools program.

When & how did you decide that trauma-sensitive strategies were what you were going to use in your classroom?

Ilene: For me it started when I learned what Developmental Trauma was and saw the photos of actual areas of the brain that were overactivated or underdeveloped. Once I grasped that it was a true difference in the development of the child's brain, it made it much easier to understand that traumatized children often "can't" do something, not "won't" do something.

Julie: I started doing some of these trauma-informed strategies long before I learned (by adopting my children) exactly what developmental trauma looked like. My background in social work caused me to search for ways to connect with each child to help them better succeed. But since my children have been home with me, I've learned the value of sensory and movement work, so I now know to do so much more in the classroom. So, what exactly is a trauma-sensitive classroom?

Julie: A trauma-sensitive classroom is where the teacher understands trauma's impact on brain development and how that manifests itself in the child's behavior. And we work hard to meet the

children where they are.

Ilene: Exactly. The classroom is set up to meet kids where they are. It's a shift in thinking. We used to assume that because a child met the age requirements to be in a certain grade that they came in with their brains ready to grasp that grade level content and behave in that age-appropriate way. When that isn't the case academically we tailor the teaching to help them learn at the level they're at. A trauma-sensitive approach means you recognize where the children are at emotionally through how they behave and you meet their social and emotional needs where they're at.

Good trauma-informed education focuses on helping to teach and support self-regulation and to build relationships with the children.

How do you know a child needs a trauma-sensitive approach? How do you identify the children?

Ilene: We don't always know, but it's always been the goal of most teachers at the earliest grade levels to connect with the parents and learn what we can about what's underneath the behaviors so we'll know what we can do to help each child.

Julie: We don't need to know, really. In my classrooms, about 25-30% of my class show signs of enough Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) for me to recognize they may need some trauma-sensitive care. I don't keep actual data, but poverty definitely has an impact too, although it's not always a factor. There are flags though.

Ilene: Exactly. Children who come in without snacks, or a bookbag, or inappropriate clothes for the weather. Or children living with grandma or ones who you know from having their older siblings, have challenging things happening in their homes.

Julie: It's not always that evident. I had one little girl who just presented extremely sad this year. I didn't uncover any specific information on what was going on at home or why. She daydreamed a lot, but wasn't really a behavior problem. I started working on building more of a connection with her, and with that little bit of positive connection, she flourished and came into the classroom with more energy and a bigger desire to learn.



Ilene: The thing about using trauma-informed strategies to help children get regulated and build relationships is that it's good for all the children. Children who don't have developmental trauma or even very many ACEs can benefit. The challenge comes in juggling 22 children's needs at once and in finding time to focus on building community when a lot of what we're supposed to be focused on is test scores.

Let's talk about that. How hard is it to be a trauma-sensitive teacher?

Ilene: The focus has been on teaching academics and getting certain test scores, not on teaching the whole child. And that's really starting to backfire. Overall, I think we're realizing that education strategies need to change, but few are willing to let go of the testing and the increased academic requirements for young children.

Julie: This is why it's hard for teachers to do trauma-sensitive or any social/emotional learning strategies in just one classroom. All stakeholders have to be involved – especially principals and everyone in the building. Ideally it's a school-wide approach, like PBIS. One with school-wide goal setting, training and ongoing improvements.

Ilene: Yes, but the big difference between trauma-informed education and PBIS is the focus isn't on how to change behaviors, but on what the children need in order to get beyond their "can't" behaviors.

So what are some of the magic things that you actually DO in your classroom to make it trauma-sensitive?

Julie: We have a sensory station in my classroom. I have to teach the children how to use it and when to use it – that is important. At first it's a novelty and everyone wants to "take a break" there. But it's fascinating to see which children continue to gravitate toward which regulating activities. Their brains know what they need and what works to help them calm down. It's important that I let them use what's working.

Ilene: I put a tepee in my room this year. It was the place children could go to calm down. Many of the children gravitated toward it because they could be "hidden". What they didn't seem to realize is that I could hear everything they said or did in the tent. Still, schools in general are not places with quiet spaces that give a child a chance to reflect or calm down. The tepee was just one tool.

Julie: I use a lot of movement in my classroom too. Children need to move and having a break to move around really helps them to re-focus. I've also used the Mind-Up curriculum and taught the children about how their brains work. It's important they know that. There are a whole host of mindfulness activities that are simple, quick and benefit the whole classroom.

What you're describing is not a situation where you do something different for the traumatized children, but where you implement things that everyone in the class can do.

Ilene: Oh no. What we do in the classroom is good for all kids. All kids need a break and need to be taught how to use tools to calm down and be able to focus. All children benefit from movement and breathing. We've always, as teachers, had to do this dance of meeting each child's needs, all 26 of them, with the academics we're required to teach. When we focus on the whole child we're actually doing this dance much better and with greater success for all children, because they're more able to learn.

Julie: It truly is about being aware of where children are emotionally and developmentally. Trauma-sensitive classrooms can help all children. Many children show up not developmentally ready for the academics. It is our job to connect with them and help them progress.