



# Building **TRAUMA-SENSITIVE** Schools

Your Guide to Creating  
Safe, Supportive  
Learning Environments  
for All Students

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## About the Author

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Jen Alexander believes that we can make a positive difference with kids, one relationship at a time, which is why she is a passionate leader in the movement to build trauma-sensitive schools. Jen loves helping others help kids and has done so in schools, as a volunteer for the Attachment & Trauma Network (ATN), and when facilitating her own trainings for educators. Most know Jen as Ms. Jen (grown-ups included). Let's give a collective thanks to the 1970's most popular female name for several years running for that. When there are many Jennifers and Jens in every circle of your life, one figures out a way to be specific. Ms. Jen is an educator with more than 15 years of experience helping youth (some traumatized, some not) as a former special education teacher and current school counselor in Iowa. She holds degrees in psychology and special education teaching as well as a master's degree in professional school counseling from the University of Northern Iowa. She is a nationally certified counselor and registered school-based play therapist. Jen is also a mom, presenter, and someone who appreciates all things creative. She enjoys writing, reading, flower gardening, and swimming as well as spending time with loved ones, friends, and her cocker spaniel Macy.

# Introduction

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During a visit, as we played together on the floor, she said.  
“Sometimes I wish that you could be my mom.”

“Well, kiddo, the truth is, I do get to be your mom when  
you’re ready for that.”

“I’m ready! I’m ready now!”

—A conversation with my daughter, age 6

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Learning how to help traumatized children as both an educator and a mom has been a bit like a trek down the rabbit hole in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll, 1865). Sometimes, it feels like everything I have ever known or believed has not only been turned upside down but has also been twisted inside out or distorted altogether. It is a process calling for personal introspection, heartfelt worry, and, at times, downright fear. Most importantly, it demands profound hope. This hope perhaps started out as rather naïve but has since transformed into a deep, meaningful, and somewhat gut-wrenching belief in the power of the human spirit, especially in the power of one person genuinely connecting with another. Experts say that the most shattering of traumas happen within relationships, and thus it is only within relationships that any healing can occur. I propose that we take that wisdom even further. Let us remember that it is only within relationships that any of us—traumatized or not—can truly live, learn, and grow.

I continue to be deeply changed and humbled by my relationships with loved ones, mentors, fellow helpers, and especially the little ones—all of whom have taught me so much, not only about the world and our children but also about myself.

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Each has also bestowed great patience in light of my many failures along the way. This book includes the knowledge I have learned from these transformative relationships.

One profoundly powerful relationship in my own life has been that with my daughter, who experienced years of early life trauma before I met her. She moved in with me at the age of six and now as a young adult has given me permission to share a few stories with you from our life together. I will tell you that no other relationship in my life has taught me more than this one, nor has any other required the depth of soul searching that this one does. From cries of pain, fear, or anger to belly laughs and the stomach cramps that follow, our relationship is intense. I know my life is richer for it, and I hope she can say the same.

The reality of schools today is that youth who have experienced trauma, like my daughter, are not few and far between. Rather, at least one in four students in the United States has experienced trauma to such a degree that it has a negative impact on school success (National Child Traumatic Stress Network Schools Committee, 2008). That means there are children and teens in every single classroom, every day, who are traumatized and need educators who can help them. It is likely that you are reading this book because you have one or more traumatized students you are concerned about. Perhaps you are unsure of how to help. Know that this book is written especially for you.

As you begin reading, please keep in mind that this book is a beginning—not the end, not the middle, but the beginning to helping educators help traumatized kids. As we progress in this movement to build trauma-sensitive schools, I expect us to wrestle with ideas and, at times, face-plant to the ground as we try new things. As such, we need to help one another back up so we can keep on keeping on, to figure out how to best help our kids, no matter how difficult or frustrating it might be. Although there is a lot we do know, there is still much we have left to learn when it comes to helping traumatized youth. With that in mind, I am glad you are here. We are in this together—for our students, for our families, and for one another.

If I can do only one thing, I wish to inspire you to not only *not* give up hope for helping even our most severely traumatized students, but to work at cultivating more of it. Now, I have no interest in talking you into the kind of hope that will have you batting your eyes in anticipation of some imaginary place in the bright blue sky where unicorns jump over rainbows. No, I am talking real-life, give-it-everything-you-have-to-give hope, because every child is worth it. If this hope is a place, it is a one where we find “our people”—those who also believe, to the depths of their being, that something or someone has the potential to make a positive difference for kids who are in the direst of places, whether that place is a current set of harmful circumstances or within their own battered hearts. This hope has seen things—hard things. She knows what we are faced with, and she does not look away from the challenge. In fact, she knows that we are going toward it like it is our job (because, folks, *it is our job!*), even though we may tremble and shake, doubt ourselves, or want nothing more than to turn back some days. This hope will help us do this work. She will be there whispering in our ear that we must tell the truth and, when necessary, fight stubbornly for what is needed so we have a realistic chance to help, really help, our kids. No doubt about it, this hope is a put on a headband to contain your wild hair, I have important work to inspire, kind of gal. Although, of course, she is also a dreamer. I encourage you to find her (or use another pronoun if that

works better for you) inside yourself and within your glimpses of other leaders you encounter, as we do what author Derek Sivers (2009) would similarly call this “hell, yes” work together.

Perhaps what the Queen told Alice in Lewis Carroll’s book can serve as part of our vision. Alice said, “There’s no use trying: one can’t believe impossible things.” The queen responded, “I daresay you haven’t had much practice. Why, sometimes, I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

What impossible things are you ready to believe about helping kids? Start to open your mind and heart to the possibilities. From there, go straight to the back of the book and look at Appendix 33. Make a copy of the mandala, find your favorite crayons, markers, or colored pencils, and color while you read. Then, let’s get to work on this business of building what (to some) may seem impossible right now: schools that meet the needs of all youth, including the masses who have been traumatized. As we do this, let us do our absolute collective best to act in ways that help. As the Dalai Lama once said, “It is not enough to be compassionate. You must act.”

## PEPPER’S STORY

Chapter 1 introduces you to Pepper. Her story is woven into the entirety of this book. Although fictional, she is like one of many traumatized students in every school district across the country. Educators pour their hearts and souls into children like Pepper each year. Teachers do everything they can and more to connect with and teach students like her. Educators lie awake at night thinking about the Peppers in their schools, wondering what to try differently tomorrow so they (and the rest of the class) can experience success. Pepper is also the kiddo who gives us stories to tell—even though we may not have a place to tell them—stories that make us chuckle, stories that haunt us to the point of tears, and stories that invite us to rejoice in the small steps forward that we know were no small feat at all.

Pepper is also the student who may lead a paraprofessional, teacher, principal, bus driver, or even school psychologist to the brink of frustration, saying, “We’ve tried everything! What on earth can we do to help this kid?” Because even though we may hesitate to formally talk about it, Pepper also brings challenges that often drain educators’ time, energy, patience, and most importantly, faith—sometimes leaving us to wonder if we really have it in us to stay in this profession another year.

Above everything, however, Pepper is likely at least one of *the* reasons why every one of us went into education in the first place. Whether big or small in age, mild or severe in her struggles, and showing whatever the wide range of learning problems, behavioral difficulties, or a combination of both, Pepper is likely the “why we are here” and the “why we stay.” She, like every other student on our campuses, matters. We must help make a difference in her life so we can ensure her academic success along with that of every other student in our care. We have to do this, of course, while juggling her needs and everyone else’s at the very same time.

## WHAT IS YOUR WHY?

If this sounds like a big responsibility, that is because it is. If it sounds like an amazing opportunity to make a positive difference in the world, it is most definitely that too. Because, you see, there is hope for all the Peppers in our schools. This book

shares what we now know about the effects of early childhood trauma on youth's developing brains and subsequent functioning. It also shares what works and why with these masses of traumatized youth who come into every single classroom, every day, yet present in a multitude of different ways.

The goal is to help each and every educator better understand the needs of students like Pepper in order to build trauma-sensitive schools. Why is this so important? This movement is about sparking awareness in teachers that brings hope for kids. It is also how we can create or rekindle hope for educators. Trauma-informed strategies will enable school personnel to experience how they can make a conscious difference in students' lives on both a personal as well as academic level. As a result, educators will increase their passion and belief in their own ability to make a positive impact. This will help prevent teacher burnout and allow educators to be the best they can be. As momentum for building trauma-sensitive schools takes off, we will ultimately cultivate hope for entire communities, and we will do it together.

## TRY THIS

Think and talk about your personal *why* for working as an educator. On a blank piece of paper, write, draw, or find another creative way to express your personal *why*. Consider these questions as a place to start:

- Why did you go into the field of education in the first place?
- Why have you stayed?
- What might help you connect with and/or rekindle your hope and passion for doing this work?

## GETTING STARTED

Helping the Peppers in our schools will require us to first take care of ourselves and one another in order to allow us to build and maintain the capacity to consistently give what our students need. It also means we must work together in intentional, systemic, and sustainable ways, because no one can do this work well alone and most certainly not for long *enough*. Many trauma-informed practices will benefit all students, but educators must develop multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) and interventions for the wide range of traumatized youth. We need to be evidence-informed in our practices while also being allowed the freedom to be creative in meeting individual student needs. There is not just one Pepper in our classrooms. There are many each year. It is our responsibility to be ready for them.

Building schools that meet the needs of traumatized students like Pepper will be a challenge. I offer no quick fixes in this book. Quick fixes do not exist or we would have landed on them by now. Although this book can serve as a framework for helping educators begin to better understand the effects of childhood trauma and then start to navigate the important process of building trauma-sensitive schools, think of this more as a springboard of foundational concepts that will help us, as educators, embrace and ultimately begin the process of designing trauma-informed school environments. In this way, building trauma-sensitive schools will be a journey, not a

destination. Along the way, we will make mistakes. It will entail steps forward and then back again just like it does for our students. Daily, we will be called to create joy in our classrooms and in our own lives because that is what is good for all of us. By doing this work together and with enthusiasm, we will build momentum and collectively create hope.

## LET'S CHANGE THE WORLD TOGETHER

As a former special education teacher for students with severe emotional and behavioral disorders, current school counselor, adoptive parent of a traumatized child, and presenter on the topic of trauma-informed education, I can assure you that our focus on becoming trauma-sensitive needs to be both personal as well as collective. There is nothing like dancing in relationship with a traumatized child or teen to bring you to your knees and help you learn about yourself as well as grow (sometimes in that ever-loving, “Do I really want to look at ‘that’ reflection of myself right here, right now?” kind of way). Thus, it requires honest self-reflection along with allowing ourselves to be vulnerable with our colleagues, in addition to being worthy of their vulnerability with us. It necessitates examining feedback wholeheartedly and being specific in our individual goals for change. We must do this work together, not in isolation. Although our personal growth will be incredible, think of the powerful outcomes for all students that will result from our collective learning and practice as we work together in our efforts to make sure all educators, teams, and entire systems become actively sensitive to the needs of traumatized youth.

This work is far from easy, but what I can promise you is that it is worth it. Every single student is worth it.

## ONE STEP AT A TIME

In the chapters that follow, the effects of trauma, neglect, and caregiver absence or abandonment on children's brains, as well as emotional, social, cognitive, and moral development, are explored. Information regarding trauma-informed and attachment-focused practices is explained. Specifically, I detail how traumatized children may present in the classroom and explain why some teaching strategies and many behavior modification techniques that may work with other students often do not work with severely traumatized youth. Finally, I share how we might use MTSS for all students, including those who have been traumatized, in order to safely and effectively meet the needs of all learners in trauma-sensitive ways. The closing chapter focuses on the importance of self-care because in order for us to help our students, we must first help ourselves and one another. In her book *Braving the Wilderness* (2017), Dr. Brené Brown quotes a conversation with a Buddhist teacher, Zen priest, anthropologist, activist, and author, Dr. Halifax, in which Dr. Halifax shared, “There is the in-breath and there is the out-breath, and it's easy to believe that we must exhale all the time, without ever inhaling. But the inhale is absolutely essential if you want to continue to exhale” (p. 148).

All suggestions for building trauma-sensitive school environments outlined in the following chapters align with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA; 2015) recommendations regarding trauma-informed approaches to human services. In fact, for the purposes of this book, the terms

*trauma-sensitive* and *trauma-informed* are used interchangeably. According to SAMHSA, to be trauma-informed, we must do the following:

- Realize the widespread impact of trauma and understand potential paths for recovery.
- Recognize the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system.
- Respond by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices.
- Seek to actively resist retraumatization.

Chapter 1 focuses on helping readers realize what trauma is, how prevalent it is, and how it affects students. Chapter 2 links attachment theory to our understanding of traumatized youth. Chapter 3 helps educators learn how to recognize the effects of trauma on youth in the classroom. Chapters 4 through 6 share a vision for building trauma-sensitive schools. Chapters 7 through 10 present tools and strategies for educators who are building trauma-sensitive school environments that not only help resist retraumatization but also help educators respond in ways that promote learning and resiliency for all. Chapter 11 shares strategies to help educators practice self-care to ensure that we have the energy and capacity to give our best to every student.

Keep in mind that trauma-informed care is a strength-based approach that helps individuals experience safety, a sense of control over their lives, and empowerment. Reaching these overarching goals within school systems and communities will certainly take knowledge as well as insight in our heads, but—even more importantly—compassion in our hearts.

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*"Listen to the mustn'ts, child. Listen to the don'ts. Listen to the shouldn'ts, the impossibles, the won'ts. Listen to the never haves, then listen close to me. Anything can happen, child. Anything can be."*

—Shel Silverstein, from *Where the Sidewalk Ends*

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