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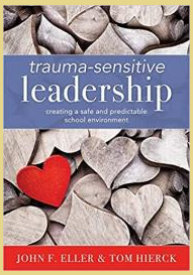

File: Student Well-Being

Trauma-Sensitive Leadership

Creating a Safe and Predictable School Environment

By John F. Eller & Tom Hierck (Solution Tree Press, 2022)

S.O.S. (A Summary of the Summary)

The main ideas of the book:

~ Because recent years have seen an increase in traumatic experiences, leaders need to develop their understanding of trauma's impact and promote understanding among staff.

~ With trauma-sensitive strategies in place, schools can step into a supportive role for trauma-impacted students, enabling them to learn and thrive.

Why I chose this book:

I'm hearing it more and more these days, and I bet you might be too: "I just don't understand why they act like this." Trauma-impacted students can perplex and overwhelm educators with their challenging behavior, but it doesn't have to be that way. Since the first schoolhouse opened, there have always been students who have shown up to school having experienced trauma. But in recent years we have come to more fully understand the effects that trauma has on the brain and on student learning and behavior.

Newer still is the understanding of the degree to which the COVID pandemic has led to increased incidences of trauma and stress among our students (and staff). This book provides school leaders with the framework needed to both understand and respond to trauma's impact in a way that promotes emotional well-being and supports learning. While this book certainly contains classroom-level strategies as well, teachers may also find further information on developing their practice in another book by the same authors, *Trauma-Sensitive Instruction*.

The Scoop (In this summary you will learn…)

✓ A science-based understanding of the impact of trauma on learning, behavior, and the brain

✓ The classroom-level changes that teachers can make to reach traumatized students

✓ School-wide structures that create a supportive environment

✓ Strategies leaders can use for building relationships of mutual support with trauma-impacted families

✓ A step-by-step process for leading an entire school on a journey toward becoming trauma sensitive

✓ The Main Idea's professional development suggestions for growing trauma-sensitivity at your school, including a PPT you can request here: PPT Workshop – Becoming a More Trauma-Sensitive School

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Introduction

So many of our students have faced physical and mental trauma in their childhoods. Because this deeply impacts both their well-being and their schooling, authors John F. Eller and Tom Hierck set out to write a book to support leaders and their schools in:

- Better *understanding* this trauma and how it impacts so many of our students
- Learning *strategies* to mitigate the impacts of this trauma and help all of our students succeed

These two authors are educators who have not only served as school and district leaders, but they are uniquely qualified to speak to this topic because they both experienced trauma in their own childhoods as well. They know firsthand what it is like to have a parent show up to a parent-teacher conference with alcohol on their breath. They know firsthand how difficult it can be for trauma-impacted students to show up at school and focus on learning.

Research has shown that childhood trauma has long-lasting effects on adults. One of the largest studies of the long-term impacts of adverse childhood experiences in the 1990s (the original ACE study) looked at how many traumatic events (such as substance abuse, parental incarceration, lack of basic needs, etc.) 17,000 adults had experienced in their youth. They found and a whopping two-thirds of the participants reported having experienced at least one. Other studies have confirmed these high percentages.

Furthermore, the incidence of trauma has only increased with the recent COVID-19 pandemic. It is the prevalence of this trauma in our student population that spurred the authors to write this book. More than ever, we need leaders and educators to understand trauma and its impact, and to develop strategies to make schools more trauma sensitive.

What exactly is a "trauma-sensitive school"? The chart below outlines some of the components of a trauma-sensitive school:

A Trauma-Sensitive School *Does*…	**A Trauma-Sensitive School *Does NOT*…**
Train staff so they understand trauma, its symptoms, and its impact	Require staff to dig deeply into the *causes* of the trauma
Systematically support teachers in building meaningful connections and relationships with students	Ignore the importance of teacher-student relationships or leave it up to chance whether these relationships form
Recognize the importance of staff developing their own social and emotional skills and self-regulation	Assume that adult behavior is unrelated to student behavior and therefore does not address it
Prioritize the development of student social and emotional skills	Focus exclusively on teaching academics
Understand that every behavior is a form of communication	Wait for a problem to exist before giving students access to trauma-sensitive services
Use restorative practices to keep students in school by working to build relationships	Address most behaviors through punishment, particularly by excluding the student from class, school, or other activities
Have systematic ways for teachers to meet regularly to discuss student welfare as well as academic achievement	Forgo team time to discuss students' well-being
Support teachers in developing a trauma-sensitive mindset: understanding the importance of centering their classes around students, bringing out the best in students, providing support and space for students when they are upset, and welcoming students	Encourage teachers to center their classes around order, structure, content, and compliance, that is, build teacher-centered classes

As a result of being in a trauma-sensitive school, those students impacted by trauma should feel cared for, welcome, supported, and therefore have an increased change of thriving both emotionally and academically.

Chapter 1: Understanding Trauma and Its Impact

Given that more students are coming from homes where they experience trauma, the first and most important step leaders can take is to support staff in developing an *understanding* of the impact of trauma on students. This understanding is key. When staff have a better understanding, they can respond calmly when students get upset rather than react quickly. Below is an example of how an AP responds once having a fuller understanding of trauma and its impact.

In one school there is an eleventh-grade girl who doesn't connect with her peers, often seems upset at school, looks away when teachers call on her, gets into arguments with teachers several times a week, and is often sent out of the classroom. On one particular day when she is sent out of the classroom, she yells, "Good, I don't want to be in your (expletive) class anyway!" Because this school has an assistant principal who understands the impact of trauma, he knows when this student gets to the office, that he should direct her to a quiet space to calm down and only after a while does the AP attempt to talk to her and have her reflect on the incident.

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This chapter helps leaders develop their own understanding of the impacts of trauma so they can model a calm response in their interactions with students (like the AP above) and build more supportive cultures. Below are four areas in which school leaders can develop their understanding of concepts related to trauma: a definition of trauma, the prevalence of trauma, the impact of trauma and on the brain, and the fact that staff may have experienced trauma in their lives, too.

Definition and Prevalence of Trauma

Because childhood trauma can lead to difficulties in school, it's important to start with a definition of what exactly trauma is:

> "Trauma is an exceptional experience in which powerful and dangerous events overwhelm a person's capacity to cope."

As was mentioned earlier, trauma in childhood is quite common. For example, "A report of child abuse is made every ten seconds in the United States." To help understand some of the common traumatic events their students are facing, leaders should look at the 10 adverse childhood experiences below that contribute to trauma. This is the from that original ACE study of 17,000 adults about their experiences before age 18.

10 Common Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Abuse

- **Emotional abuse:** An adult living with you swore at you, insulted you, put you down, made you afraid
- **Physical abuse:** An adult at home pushed, grabbed, slapped, threw something at you or hit you hard
- **Sexual abuse:** An adult at home (or family friend or stranger) touched or fondled you in a sexual way or made you touch them or attempted to have intercourse with you

Neglect

- **Emotional neglect:** No one at home made you feel important or loved, the family didn't look out for one another, no one at home was a source of support or strength
- **Physical neglect:** No one at home took care of you, protected you, took you to the doctor if you needed it, you didn't have sufficient food, your parents were too drunk/high to care for you, you had to wear dirty clothes

Household Challenges

- **Mother treated violently:** Your mother was pushed, grabbed, slapped, kicked, or hurt repeatedly or threated by knife or gun by father or boyfriend
- **Substance abuse at home:** A member of your household was an alcoholic, drinker, or used street drugs
- **Mental illness in the family:** A member of your household was depressed, mentally ill, or attempted suicide
- **Parental separation or divorce:** Your parents separated or got divorced
- **Incarcerated household member:** A member of your household went to prison

While the effects of trauma are different for each person, without a doubt, trauma has a long-lasting impact on *learning*. When students come from homes and neighborhoods where the above are regular occurrences, it becomes difficult for them to calm down enough to feel safe and learn at school. They may be constantly worried and looking out for fear of violence. When students experience two or more of the ten ACEs above, they experience a multiplier effect and are considered to have *complex trauma*.

Then add to this the fact that students are experiencing a great deal of stress from two years of pandemic living and virtual learning. Students report that it can be hard to "do school" after learning at home in a virtual environment for so long. At the same time, teachers feel pressure to catch up students academically, so they may be pushing students which only adds to their feelings of stress.

Impact of Trauma on the Brain

Given all of the above, we need to work with teachers on how to interact with students who have experienced trauma. It helps for the leader to start by developing their own understanding of the types of traumatic events our students are experiencing and knowing how this trauma impacts the brain (below). When you develop this knowledge, you can:

- Help teachers respond to student reactions from trauma,
- Help teachers deal appropriately with classroom behavior incidents, and
- Support teachers in making changes to their classroom processes and procedures that are more trauma sensitive.

Understanding the Brain and Trauma

<u>The Reptilian Region of the Brain – The Brainstem and Cerebellum</u>

Like the brains of most reptiles, this part of the brain isn't for thinking, it's for reacting. It controls automatic functions like breathing and heart rate. After scanning the environment for danger, this part of the brain helps students react quickly – *without thinking* – in order to protect themselves. In fact, when trauma-impacted students react aggressively, this may be their way of taking some control of a situation if they come from a home in which they have little or no control.

When students are triggered, the best thing educators can do is to provide a safe and predictable environment and to try to move student thinking to a more cognitive part of the brain that is less reactionary.

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The Limbic Region of the Brain – The Amygdala and More

This more complex region of the brain helps students communicate and regulate emotions (such as fear!) When students experience stress or fear, the amygdala (part of the limbic region) sends *cortisol* as a message to the reptilian region which impacts breathing, heart rate, etc. This essentially shuts down all thinking and learning and causes a *fight or flight* response (students may try to fight back or flee physically or mentally when they experience trauma) which teachers often interpret as misbehavior. Students cannot return to thinking until their cortisol levels have gone down, and according to Zaretta Hammond, "Cortisol stops all learning in the body for about 20 minutes and stays in the body for up to 3 hours."

Teachers may have a particularly difficult time understanding this "misbehavior" because they do not necessarily "cause" the stress. In fact, the traumatic or stressful incident may have occurred at home, but the student arrived at school with continued elevated levels of cortisol in the brain.

Below is an example of how one principal had teachers make just a few small trauma-sensitive changes to help them productively address the kinds of responses to trauma above that students may be going through.

Principal Allaway understood that some of his students were experiencing trauma at home and arriving with high levels of cortisol in their systems which caused them to act out and prevented them from learning. He also knew that building relationships and proactively addressing this behavior was the best approach.

To address this, he had teachers develop classroom check-in procedures at the beginning of each class in which students were given an opportunity to assess their own moods and take extra time to prepare for learning if necessary. He also changed the attendance procedure so teachers not only reported absences, but they also noted which students reported their moods as "not ready for learning" or "I need time to myself." Then Principal Allaway was able to respond by having those students who assessed themselves as unready to learn more than two times a week meet with his counseling staff.

Staff May Have Experienced Trauma, Too

One final note is that because the prevalence of ACEs is so high, it may turn out that your staff have experienced some type of trauma in their own lives as well. This is important to be aware of because these staff members, in some cases, may be *better able* to relate to students who have experienced trauma, *or*, in other cases, they may be *less tolerant* because they may feel that they have developed the resilience to move beyond their childhood experiences, so why shouldn't their students. Keep this in mind.

Chapter 2: Developing a Trauma-Sensitive *Attitude* and School *Culture*

Perhaps this sounds familiar. A teacher regularly complains about a student who is rude and disrupts the class. This one student causes more chaos in the class than all other students combined. It gets worse each day and the teacher becomes more and more frustrated and resentful. Removing the student does *not* work. What is the alternative? What can you as the leader do? You can work to transform the school *culture* and *attitudes* to be more trauma sensitive.

What would a more trauma-sensitive *culture* and *mindset* look like?

- Students feel well cared-for and welcomed in the school
- Teachers greet students at the entryway of their classrooms each day
- Teachers carve out physical spaces in their classrooms for students when they are upset to regroup and return when ready
- Teachers don't just teach content – they teach social-emotional and problem-solving skills in their classes
- When they observe negative behaviors, rather than reacting and escalating, teachers take time to reflect on the cause
- Teachers view discipline as a learning experience to help students grow

Overall, the school would be a place that would be more student centered than teacher centered, and instead of staff blaming students for behavioral issues, they would come together to collaboratively examine possible causes and strategies to address them.

Rationale for Changing Mindsets

So, what is the mindset or attitude leaders should instill in their staff?

Leaders should help teachers understand everything about trauma and its impact that was introduced in the previous chapter. Teachers need to understand problematic student behavior as the result of students having been let down by people in their lives. Perhaps it is the result of pain, abuse, or neglect. But overall, that behavior is a form of communication that the adults need to tune into.

This doesn't mean your school won't have consequences, it just means that the culture will be more trauma sensitive. It's not about staff lowering expectations, it's about *understanding* that students will better thrive in a situation in which the adults believe in them, support them, and give them solid boundaries and guidance in making more appropriate behavioral choices.

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Why is this mindset so important? Because how staff **see** things affects what they **do**. "What they [staff] are doing is based on their belief systems, habits, and culture; therefore, meaningful change results from first seeing things in a new way." Even if we, as leaders, and our staff have general knowledge of trauma, we might not fully understand the depth of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to fully support students, we need to heighten our awareness that this pandemic was not just another event. As leaders, we need to fully to convey to our teachers the degree to which trauma is impacting our students in social, emotional, and academic ways.

One of the most important things a leader can do to promote shifts in attitude is to *model* it. When students lose control and are upset, leaders can model what it looks like to maintain control and show empathy for students. Leaders can model taking time to respond to students so they can be sure to respond appropriately rather than immediately reacting.

Further, they can respond this way to teachers who are overwhelmed or frustrated as well by being supportive, empathetic, and responding thoughtfully. Leaders play a key role in supporting staff in maintaining or developing a more *positive mindset* around trauma-impacted students.

Developing a Culture of Safety, Predictability, and Consistency

In addition to *mindset*, another important area that leaders can work to make more trauma sensitive is school *culture*. While we can't stop trauma from occurring, we can create the types of safe cultures in our schools where students feel safe, supported, and successful. This type of school culture is essential if we want students who have been impacted by trauma to grow and learn. Below are three vital elements needed to create an environment in which students can develop the coping skills and resilience to learn:

1. Safety: A safe culture is one that is free from bullying, violence, and threats. Students can be who they are, trust others, and be vulnerable. The environment is characterized by respect, acceptance, inclusion, and celebration. Staff intentionally develop connections with every student and the school uses rituals, routines, and protocols to convey expectations and provide support.

2. Predictability: A predictable environment is one in which interactions, conditions, and expectations are predictable and students and staff are more able to regulate their responses. This culture is characterized by trust, clear communication, proactive measures, and a relentless focus on the mission.

3. Consistency: A big part of safety is maintaining consistency. Consistency happens when staff agree to and implement common procedures, policies, and practices that contribute to student success. This includes a common embrace of the mindset that all students will be successful.

Think through how you, as the leader, would operationalize these three elements, keeping in mind that, "Being the leader of a trauma-sensitive school doesn't mean you have all the answers—it does mean you commit to being part of seeking a solution."

Six Principles to Guide a Trauma-Sensitive School

To ensure that your school is truly trauma sensitive, it helps to start with these six principles identified by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Once you understand these principles that support a trauma-sensitive school, then you can work to ensure that every policy and practice – from budgeting and discipline to the curriculum – aligns well to them.

1. Safety: After experiencing trauma, people don't feel safe and end up expending their resources on remaining hyper-vigilant. To help them feel safe, build an environment that focuses on healing, learning, and healthy development.

2. Trust and dependability: Trauma makes it hard for people to trust others. To build trust it helps to prioritize steadfast, authentic relationships and provide stability and predictability.

3. An understanding of stress and trauma: It's hard to know how to respond until you *understand* the impact of stress and trauma on a person. Work with peers to develop understanding and compassionate responses.

4. Collaboration: Trauma can make people feel alone so it helps to develop healthy relationships in which those impacted by trauma experience *power with* others so they can feel safe and trusting enough to engage in learning.

5. Empowerment: Because trauma takes away people's sense of control and leaves them feeling helpless and hopeless, it helps to create an environment in which people's voices are heard, their strengths recognized, and they are empowered to move forward.

6. Cultural humility and equity: Different groups react to trauma differently and acknowledging historical and institutional adversity with humility can help in not re-traumatizing people and beginning to address historical trauma as well.

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Chapter 3: How Trauma-Sensitive Classroom Cultures Build a Supportive School Culture

What exactly does the culture of a trauma-sensitive classroom feel like? Imagine the difference between a traditional classroom and a trauma-sensitive one from the chart below:

Traditional Classroom	Trauma-Sensitive Classroom
• There is no systematic way that teachers build meaningful connections with students • Teachers center their classes around order and structure • Teachers focus on content and compliance • Teachers do not actively invest in building relationships • Teachers have regular confrontations with students • Teachers demand respect but don't show it to students • Classrooms are teacher centered	• Teachers prioritize and invest in building relationships with students • Teachers center their classes around the students • Teachers focus on bringing out the best in their students • Teachers welcome students into the classroom each day • Teachers provide spaces for students when they are upset • Teachers teach social-emotional and problem-solving skills • Teachers stop and reflect before responding to student behavior • Teachers view student discipline as a learning opportunity • Students feel cared for and welcomed

Trauma-sensitive *classrooms* lie at the core of building a trauma-sensitive *school*. Below are three steps to create a stable and predictable school-wide environment in which trauma-impacted students can feel safe and succeed:

Step 1: Develop teachers' awareness of trauma and its impact on students
Step 2: Build schoolwide processes that contribute to a supportive environment
Step 3: Support teachers in building trauma-sensitive classrooms

So, what might these steps look like? In one example, after a principal realized that a number of students were arriving at school already stressed, the principal decided to:

***Step 1*: Provide PD workshops to raise teachers' awareness of trauma and how it impacts student learning:**
- *Provide one PD to staff about the prevalence of trauma and its impact on students – particularly first thing in the morning*
- *Provide another PD on the benefits of building safe and predictable environments in school*

***Step 2*: In order to set up school-wide processes that create a safe environment, the principal starts with what he can control:**
- *He decides to play music as students enter the school as a way to calm them down*
- *Rather than making students wait outside the school, he decides to allow them to enter when they arrive*
- *He ensures some staff arrive early so students can complete schoolwork in quiet areas and build relationships with adults*

***Step 3*: The principal, with the leadership team, outlines trauma-sensitive classroom procedures all teachers can implement:**
- *A self-check-in process for students*
- *Some type of mood check or self-assessment procedure (like the one described on p.3 of the summary)*
- *Designated quiet or thinking areas students can choose to go to when needed*
- *A process for teachers to inform counselors when they suspect a student is having a tough day*

Note that the examples above to make a school more trauma sensitive can actually benefit *all* students. Of course, these strategies won't fix all problems due to trauma, but they will help tremendously in putting all students on a path to success.

Five Ways to Support Trauma-Impacted Students in the Classroom

One essential way that you, as a leader, can support trauma-impacted students, is through your impact on the teachers. There are some foundational classroom structures that will help students who have experienced trauma feel more safe and supported so they can learn. You can support teachers in implementing these structures and by following up as well.

A. Teacher Attitude and Relationships: As the leader you can model and reinforce the idea that students coming from traumatic homes need unconditional support. This means teachers having a caring and positive attitude and believing that they are there to teach *children* first and *content* second.

One way to help them realize how important relationships are is to have them fill out a paper with 13 lines to write down one significant memory from every grade, K-12. When they share what they've written, they will see that people mostly write about emotional connection, not content, as the thing they remember most about school.

Further, have teachers reflect on their own strengths as a way to remind them of the importance of focusing on students' strengths. This doesn't mean any of this relationship building will be easy, "Relationships are not easy... Just managing 'normal' relationships with our friends, coworkers, and family can be challenging. When we bring trauma-affected students into the equation, the delicate nature of relationships stands out even more clearly."

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B. Classroom Culture: You can spot a supportive classroom culture when you see students working collaboratively toward common goals, listening to and respecting each other, and working together to address difficult issues so they can return to their caring culture. In working with teachers, be sure to emphasize not only the importance of such a culture, but that *they* are the ones to establish this strong culture. The more that teachers create supportive cultures in their classrooms, the more this has a ripple effect and influences the culture of the entire school. As a school leader, you can further support this effort by conducting walkthroughs that focus on caring classroom structures, praising students when they follow through with supportive behaviors, and by giving time in faculty meetings for teachers to brainstorm ways to develop supportive cultures and problem-solve when they have challenges with implementation.

C. Predictable Classroom Structures: Given that trauma-impacted students often don't know when a drunk parent may come home and be violent, their brains are often on high alert and they need predictable classroom structures. This means having daily check-in routines, consistent approaches to discipline issues, and creating a predictable schedule. There are more suggestions for classroom structures in the authors' other book for teachers: *Trauma-Sensitive Instruction*.

D. Movement: It can be difficult for trauma-affected students (and all students!) to sit for prolonged periods of time. Leaders can support teachers in finding ways to weave movement into their classes to re-energize students' learning centers in the brain and to prevent boredom. Even just 30 seconds of students moving their bodies can help with this! Think about how long *you* can sit in PD before your brain gets restless. Some simple strategies include having students:

- Stand regularly to stretch
- Get up to meet with other students
- Use simple movements like hand signals
- Move to corners of the room to vote with their bodies
- Take a one-minute walk around the room
- Use manipulatives in their learning

E. Helping Students Reflect on and Monitor Their Mind States: A key part of trauma-impacted students building resilience is developing the ability to manage their emotions. At home they may move from trauma to trauma without thinking about it. Leaders can help teachers establish a culture that includes regular reflection – for example, ask students to reflect on whether they are using the *upstairs* part of their brain (thinking and problem solving) or the *downstairs* part (reacting and defending). Teachers might try to:

- Have students write down and then read their thoughts
- Use *emotion meters* so students can identify and rate emotions
- Have students display a green, yellow, or red laminated card to let the teacher know if they need to move to a quiet location
- Provide midday class meetings (like morning meetings) for students to discuss and process events and emotions

Reflecting on the Learning Environment

Another way leaders can support teachers in ensuring their classroom learning environment is conducive to students who have experienced trauma and isn't exacerbating the situation, is to have them regularly step back and assess that environment. Are the structures and processes in each class trauma sensitive? The authors provide a 5-question assessment that teachers can use to identify any areas that might be adversely impacting the learning environment.

1. List the possible traumas that might be impacting your students.
2. Write down any processes or procedures in your classroom that may be contributing to or triggering undesirable behaviors.
3. What evidence do you have that these procedures are triggering the unwanted behavior?
4. What changes might you implement that would help your learning environment become more trauma sensitive?
5. What would be the best timeline to implement these changes? What resources will you need?

When you, as the leader, work with teachers to make their individual classroom cultures more trauma sensitive, this ends up impacting the culture of the entire school.

Chapter 4: Building Relationships with Families

It probably goes without saying that children in trauma benefit tremendously when parents are engaged in their learning. But what may be less obvious is that this engagement is a two-way street. Yes, the family needs information from the school such as what their child is currently learning and what's for homework tonight. But the school also needs information from the family.

All students that experience trauma are different, and we don't always know their stories, their context, or other inside information we may need. We don't know what families are going through or how they work with their children at home. Families can support us in our efforts to help students, and we can support them in their efforts to help their children. In fact, the National Parent Teacher Association tells us that, "the best predictor of student success is the extent to which their families encourage learning at home and involve themselves in their child's education." While not all families will do this, there are many families who will involve themselves more if they are invited to do so and made to feel welcome in the process.

As a bonus, authentically engaged parents tend to think more highly of educators, which can, in turn, lead to improved morale among teachers. And teachers can better engage students in learning if they understand more about the student's context and culture. Students in trauma who see their parents are involved in their education are also more likely to view their teachers as adults they can trust.

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Unfortunately, the families you need to spend the most time with often have the least contact with the school. They may fear judgement or feel out of place in schools or among other parents. They may have had bad experiences in school when they were young or been unable to complete school due to their own trauma. In some cases, immigrant families may keep their distance from the school as a sign of respect.

Yet it is even more crucial that you work with the families of trauma-impacted students than those who are not. As a leader, you must make it a priority to initiate and build these connections so you can support their needs and make them aware of necessary resources.

What can you do as a leader to nurture parent engagement, particularly with the families of trauma-impacted students?

Approach Parents Gently

- Make your first contact *early in the year*, so families know they are welcome, and also make it *positive* so that if you need to have a conversation later about a problem, then at least you will have set a positive tone to start.
- For families in trauma, a general outreach like a newsletter or email to all parents may not be enough. A more personal effort, like a direct conversation, may be needed.
- Consider taking the first steps in a neutral territory, away from both school and home.
- Avoid casting judgement. Families in trauma often fear being judged and suffering consequences for the situations they experience (and cause) with their children. Try to accept people as they are and avoid making suggestions too early in the relationship. If you take the time to build the relationship, families may be more open to your suggestions and support later. *On the other hand, do not ignore dangerous situations, and carry out your role as a mandatory reporter when necessary.*
- Listen first, talk later. Put your own thoughts and ideas on hold and truly listen to what the parents have to say.
- Control your negative reactions. If you learn something shocking or upsetting, try not to let your facial expression or body language convey judgement.
- Consider the strengths of the family's own cultural or religious background.

Engage and Sustain that Engagement

Once you've established a connection with a family, you have the foundation of your relationship. Your next steps are to find ways to build on the foundation and develop parent engagement that is *collaborative*: the family and the school sharing responsibility for the child's education. You will need to engage the family and then sustain that engagement.

Engage by providing a variety of activities on a frequent basis that parents can become involved in. These could include volunteer opportunities, chances to participate in decision-making, parent education, fun community events, or support for children's learning. Incredible progress can be made by inviting parents in as true partners, including seeking their input on policies, curriculum, and budget.

Sustain engagement by thinking about and addressing potential roadblocks to family involvement such as lack of transportation, scheduling conflicts, and feeling unwelcome at the school. Actively work against these and other issues as you plan and carry out family engagement plans. Communicate using parent-preferred methods, which often trend toward digital with younger parents.

Support the Family's Needs

- Focus on the child. Seek solutions motivated by the needs of the student. You may also need to support a teacher and their needs, but do not make this the focus of your conversation with the child's parent.
- Make families aware of community resources that could benefit them.
- Promote safety for all family members.
- Help prevent exposure to further trauma.

Educate Without Alienating

Begin by discovering what the families' needs are that the school may be able to meet. Hold an informal "coffee and conversation" at a regularly scheduled time where parents know they may come and chat with you. Use a survey to determine what parents may be interested in learning. **Possible topics** to include:

Understanding Report Cards	Child Development	Parent-Teacher Conferences
Helping Kids with Homework	Discipline	Community Support Services

You can also help families by educating them on signs of post-traumatic stress and how it can affect families. Be sure to connect them with evidence-based treatments. At the same time, avoid educator jargon that may make families feel ignorant or out of place.

Consider sharing information through family newsletters or on the school website that will help families **create trauma-sensitive homes.** You might include suggestions and tips like the following in your newsletter:

- Establish a predictable schedule and other structures at home to increase stability.
- Make sure your children have time for rest, play, and fun.
- Speak of the future and make plans to help your children see the future as hopeful and safe rather than bleak and scary.
- Reassure your children of their current safety and help them contextualize past traumatic events.
- Remain calm and relaxed as a parent. Manage adult stress in order to help your children better manage their stress.

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Chapters 5, 6, & 7: Becoming a Trauma-Sensitive School

New fifth-grader, Greg, forcefully shoves away and curses at a teacher who placed a hand on his shoulder as a friendly gesture. With a **traditional response**, Greg would be given some consequence in order to teach him that shoving and cursing at a teacher is unacceptable. But with a **trauma-sensitive response,** staff would consider that Greg's behavior may be the result of his experience with toxic stress and trauma, and instead of asking, "What's wrong with that student?" they would ask "What happened to that student?" and "What do they need?" Staff might conclude that Greg needs to learn emotional regulation skills and communication skills in order to peacefully communicate his boundaries about being touched.

What changes need to take place within *your* school so that leaders, teachers, and staff are all using a trauma-sensitive approach? Teachers often receive little training in behavior management. This skill deficit can then be compounded when teachers are faced with the challenging behaviors of trauma-impacted students. If you want teachers to respond sensitively and skillfully to difficult behavior, you'll need to make sure they have the *understanding* and *skills* to do so.

Basics Teachers Need to Understand About Trauma-Impacted Students

- Students' responses are adaptive patterns based on their personal experiences, and their patterns won't always align with the behaviors expected at school.
- Behavior is communication.
- Students are seeking to meet their needs.
- Students may have difficulty regulating or understanding emotions.
- Students may lack essential skills (academic or behavioral) that they need to feel successful at school.
- Students' past experiences may have led them to conclude that adults cannot be trusted.

Beyond Behaviorism

Most educators have heard that people's behavior can be modified with rewards and punishments. However, these behaviorist methods may not work well with trauma-impacted students (and others, too). The punishment of being sent to the office might not deter a student from disrupting class again tomorrow. A promised reward might convince a student to alter their behavior in the short term, but it doesn't get to the root of the problem. To become truly trauma sensitive we need to look beyond pure behaviorist methods.

When a trauma-impacted student is acting out, we are probably seeing their *dysregulated stress response.* Their energy and focus are drawn into their fight-or-flight response, and less of their resources are available for learning, concentration, or logical reasoning. Once a student is in this mode, it will take time for them to come out of it and return to their normal reasoning abilities. Therefore, a classroom management approach that relies on the teacher *reacting* to student behavior is not going to do much to change the behavior of trauma-impacted students. By the time they've acted out, their bodies are likely over-loaded with stress and their brains are not available for learning from the teacher's reaction.

Teachers can turn this around by taking a *proactive approach* to classroom management. This includes providing a predictable and safe learning environment, teaching expected behaviors *in advance* before problem behavior occurs, and engaging kids with immediately clear expectations—such as a problem of the day that is always found on the board—instead of a less predictable routine for entering the room and starting class.

Teachers should also use an **ABC** (antecedent, behavior, consequence) analysis to study problem behaviors and seek to discover why they occur. An **antecedent** could be a stressor occurring in the classroom (being asked to read aloud) or out of the classroom (it's Friday afternoon, and the student is dreading the weekend in an abusive home). The **behavior** is likely the most noticeable part of the sequence. It could be anything from tuning out to becoming violent. Lastly, what are the behavior's **consequences**? A consequence could be intentionally given, like a detention, or less intentional like other students getting annoyed. The behavior might also have consequences that act as rewards (escaping a disliked subject to sit in the hall, or eliciting laughs from classmates).

Once the analysis provides a clearer understanding of what is happening and why, the teacher can problem solve, possibly with the student, at a calm time, and figure out a way to avoid the problem behavior in the future by being more aware of the **antecedent**.

Addressing Attachment Issues

In an ideal environment, children grow up securely attached to parents, loved by them, learning from them, and confident they can depend on them to meet their needs. However, trauma-impacted children have often experienced disrupted attachment either because of their parents' absence, their parents' actions, or circumstances beyond the parents' control, such as illness. Disrupted attachment inhibits a child's abilities to form healthy relationships and can impact them negatively throughout their lives.

Educators can play a powerful role in helping these children. Teachers can build positive student-teacher relationships, even with students who are difficult to relate to. Teachers can also look for the strengths and positive attributes in every kid. And, they can exhibit unconditional positive regard for all students, assuming the best in their intentions.

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Building Positive Teacher-Student Relationships

In theory, teachers may know the power of positive relationships, but in reality, some students will be easier to relate to or easier to like than others. Trauma-sensitive teachers must develop their skills at seeking and building positive relationships with *all* their students. In practice, this might look like reaching out to students before their year begins with a postcard, phone call, or email. It could include individual or small-group meetings where teacher and students can talk and get to know each other. It might include an interest inventory or a personal survey to learn about students' families, pets, hobbies, birthdays, favorite movies and TV, etc.

Once the *understanding* of trauma is in place, it must be translated into *action*. Here is a quick review of the actions teachers can take:

What Teachers Can Do to Become More Trauma Sensitive
• Use a problem-solving approach and engage students in resolving the problem.
• Look for antecedents to problem behavior. What comes before may point to a possible solution.
• Provide a safe and predictable environment where the teacher's expectations are clear.
• Build positive student-teacher relationships.
• Exhibit unconditional positive regard for all students.
• Focus on students' strengths.

Your school may include some teachers who are already trauma sensitive in their practices. But a handful of trauma-sensitive teachers and a trauma-sensitive leader or two do *not* make a trauma-sensitive *school*. This transformation will require strong leadership, intentional planning, and follow-through.

Steps for Leaders Shaping Trauma-Sensitive Schools

Step 1: **Signal the need for change using data and strong leadership.** Present the trauma-related problem clearly to your leadership team. Ground your explanation with relevant data from your own school such as: office referrals, bus referrals, tardies, numbers of students disengaged from learning during class, decline in achievement, student outbursts, time on-task, the time it takes to get classes started, etc. Couple this with basic information about the impact of trauma on students and why a change in approach is necessary.

Step 2: **Develop buy-in by including an instructional leadership team in the initial planning.** Teacher leaders in your school can play a critical role in your initial analysis of data and development of a plan to become a trauma-sensitive school. With them on board, it will likely be easier to generate enthusiasm and foster understanding of the issues among the rest of the staff. "Launch" the initiative to the whole staff yourself, presenting again your school's relevant data, basic information on trauma impact, and your strong statement on why change is necessary. Follow this launch immediately with a chance to review the data and ask questions in small groups. These small groups can be led by members of the instructional leadership team.

Step 3: **Choose a few key practices to focus on.** Select *just a few* common practices *everyone* can employ that are highly visible, easy to implement, and that you believe will have a positive impact. For example, you might focus on just two areas: **building positive relationships** and **reducing teacher-student conflict escalation**.

For **building relationships**, you might ask *all* teachers to send welcome postcards to all students and greet every student upon entry to their classroom. And the school as a whole might provide an open gym in the mornings where kids and adults can connect informally and positively with one another.

For **de-escalating conflict**, you might find a virtual training that teachers can participate in, have admin visit classes and re-enforce this goal, and have instructional coaches work to support teachers with this as well. Rather than trying to do everything all at once and getting burnt out and overwhelmed, focus on a small number of changes at first like these two.

Step 4: **Support staff in committing to staying trauma-sensitive long-term**

• **Fold it into everything.** Do not allow trauma-sensitivity to become something that is "done" once or done in a siloed manner, such as only in a social-emotional lesson. Instead, trauma-sensitive practices and ways of thinking should be folded into all that you do and consistently paired with academic content. For example, remind staff of the importance of consistent ongoing structures such as greeting students at the door, holding morning meetings, and having an entry routine that provides students with structure right away.

• **Build a trauma-sensitive and committed staff.** After initial training in trauma-sensitivity, provide ongoing support. Be sure the basics of what you're doing reach every adult at school, including bus drivers, custodians, food service staff, etc. If you do not include them, these well-meaning adults might react to student misbehavior in ways that undermine the school's trauma-sensitive approach.

Build the capacity of your entire staff with a mix of approaches, potentially including drop-in discussions before or after school, book or topic study groups, observations (or video viewings) of teachers demonstrating trauma-sensitive practices, work with instructional coaches, off-site professional development, and inclusion of trauma-sensitive practices in job descriptions and evaluation materials. Ask staff to share examples of their successful strategies at meetings.

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• **Model the practices you want to see.** If you want teachers to begin class right away and run class according to a consistent routine, do the same when you run faculty meetings. If you want teachers to get to know students on a more personal level, get to know the teachers. You, too, can conduct a survey about interests, pets, families, birthdays, etc. You, too, can exhibit unconditional positive regard for teachers, focus on their strengths, and assume the best in their intentions. In addition to being a good example, these practices will reduce adult stress levels and increase comfort and a sense of community at work.

• **Expect problems and solve them together.** Do not assume that teachers can be trained once and will transform into trauma-sensitive instructors overnight. Initial training needs to be followed up. Review progress and identify parts of the implementation that are going well. Discuss problems or challenges that have emerged as a result of the implementation and brainstorm new solutions together to keep the implementation on track. Finally, put a date on the calendar for the next problem-solving meeting to signal that challenges are normal and teachers will be supported (by leadership and one another) as they encounter problems along the way.

• **Track and celebrate success.** Whatever data you used to initially present the problem to teachers, be sure to revisit it as you evaluate the initiative's success. Track office referrals, absences and tardies, time-on-task in classrooms, or whatever other data points will show progress. Additionally, you could conduct surveys or focus groups of students and teachers to learn what's working, what's not, and where you might go from here.

And be sure to celebrate every step along the way. Be sure to bring forward the hopeful news and the happy stories taking place in the school. Thank teachers with tangible rewards (get-out-of-duty passes?), and words of encouragement, and large group fun (ice cream party!).

Lastly, here's a quick list of actions leaders can take to get their school on track toward becoming more trauma sensitive:

What Leaders Can Do to Support Trauma-Sensitive Change
• Train all staff in childhood trauma, its signs and symptoms, and its impact on learning and development. • Promote connectedness and resilience among staff through community building and group support opportunities. • Prioritize social-emotional learning and allow teachers to prioritize it within their classrooms, too. • Review and update school policies to align with a trauma-informed approach. • Create teacher ownership by including them in the analysis of existing methods and development of new methods. • Develop a three-year plan beginning from your own starting point. Try to avoid comparing to other schools. • Look for signs of secondary traumatic stress in teachers resulting from their exposure to students' traumatic stories. • Show teachers you care about them and build positive leader-teacher relationships. • Model the practices you want to see. • Celebrate!

It will take substantial energy and time to change the *understanding* and the *practices* of the leaders and educators at your school, but given the potential this effort has to significantly improve the lives of trauma-impacted students both in and outside of school, this is a journey well worth embarking on.

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THE MAIN IDEA's PD Suggestions to Become a More Trauma-Sensitive School

Materials: Make double-sided copies of the HANDOUT and the 1-pager (Becoming a Trauma-Sensitive School) on each side.

These workshop ideas are for a leader to use with teachers and staff to develop a more trauma-sensitive school. Be sure to include every adult in the school, including bus drivers, custodians, food service staff, etc. if you want to become truly trauma sensitive.

Ahead of time/ pre-workshop work for the leader

To prepare for the workshop, do some background research on your school. Together with other leaders, examine data that might reveal issues with trauma such as: office referrals, bus referrals, tardies, numbers of students disengaged from learning during class, decline in achievement, student outbursts, time on-task, the time it takes to get classes started, etc. This can be a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data (Talk to people! Use surveys, focus groups, one-on-one interviews, etc.)

Where might there be indicators of trauma's impact? Where would you hope/expect to see change as the school becomes more trauma sensitive? What would that change look like? (Example: fewer office referrals) Write a hypothesis: what trauma-sensitive practices, if implemented, would you expect to have a positive impact on this data?

NOTE TO THE FACILITATOR: Be sure to run this PD in a trauma-sensitive way. That is, model trauma-sensitive methods (you'll see these in the book summary) such as prioritizing people over content, building relationships, allowing for reflection, planning for movement, etc. There are some suggestions for ways to do this woven into the activities below.

Introduction

A. Warm Welcome

1. To model being a trauma-sensitive leader, be sure to start by making people feel welcome and connecting people to each other. Have your materials set in advance so you can greet people at the door, say something personal to them ("How was your daughter's soccer game?") and welcome them warmly.

2. To start on a positive note, ask everyone to turn to the person next to them and share something positive from the summer or the last few weeks. After everyone is done, be sure to highlight what you just did – prioritized caring, relationships, and people.

B. Check In with Staff

We often start PD assuming everyone is ready to learn just like teachers start classes assuming all students are ready to learn. Share this idea out loud with staff and tell them you want to hear how they're doing.

Do a poll: "Hold up 1, 2, 3, or 4 fingers to respond to the poll below" or do this electronically so it's anonymous—

1 = Not ready to learn – I have an extremely pressing issue to deal with
2 = I'm having a tough day but will be able to rally myself to learn
3 = I'm open and ready to learn
4 = I am particularly excited to learn about this topic

Then ask staff to either show their fingers or share in pairs. Be prepared ahead of time for what you'll do if people raise just 1 finger (Give them the option to skip the PD? Check in with them to see if they are OK during the PD?) Then tell them they can do a check-in procedure like this with their students each day and if a student raises 1 finger several times, you should alert the administration.

C. Introduce the Agenda (and share the book these ideas are based on)

I. What to KNOW – Develop staff awareness of trauma and its impact on students
II. What to DO – Learn and brainstorm trauma-sensitive strategies
III. Keep It Up – Build consistent school-wide trauma-sensitive approaches and support teachers
Explain the workshop ideas come from a book AND there's a version for teachers if you want to read it: *Trauma-Sensitive Instruction*

I. What to KNOW – Develop staff awareness of trauma and its impact on students

A. The Rationale for This Work

1. Share the rationale for this workshop. For example: *So many students have faced physical and mental trauma in their childhoods.* (You might share the ACE study in the summary.) *Because this deeply impacts both their well-being and their schooling, we are going to learn more about trauma and then think about ways we can make our school and classrooms more trauma sensitive.*

Next, share the data you found about your own school (tardies, lack of engagement, etc.), a definition of trauma, and examples:

"Trauma is an exceptional experience in which powerful and dangerous events overwhelm a person's capacity to cope."

Examples: ABUSE - emotional, physical, sexual abuse
NEGLECT - Emotional, physical neglect
HOUSEHOLD CHALLENGES – substance abuse, mental illness, mom abused, separation/divorce, incarceration

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2. In pairs or triads, have teachers discuss this rationale – Are they seeing the impact of trauma on students? Have they seen the incidence of trauma increase with the pandemic? Has there been an increase in students having trouble coping in their classes/buses?

B. What to KNOW About Trauma and its Impact

1. Have teachers do a live read (meaning everyone is silent and reads at the same time in their heads) about the reptilian and limbic regions of the brain and the Basics Teachers Need on their **HANDOUT**.

2. Next, have staff get up and find a partner across the room (movement!) to discuss:
   - How does this information about the impact of trauma on the brain influence your understanding of student behavior?
   - Discuss this quote from Zaretta Hammond and what it means for us in schools: "Cortisol stops all learning in the body for about 20 minutes and stays in the body for up to 3 hours."

II: What to DO – Brainstorm trauma-sensitive strategies

A. What to DO – Proactive Strategies to Address Trauma

1. Have teachers do another live read, this time about the importance of proactive approaches trauma. Give them time to read the part of the HANDOUT called "What to DO" and also the 1-pager on the back, "Becoming a Trauma-Sensitive School."

2. Project this scenario of one student (or make up your own scenario) on a screen:

In one school there is an eleventh-grade girl who doesn't connect with her peers, often seems upset at school, looks away when teachers call on her, gets into arguments with teachers several times a week, and is often sent out of the classroom. On one particular day when she is sent out of the classroom, she yells, "Good, I don't want to be in your (expletive) class anyway!"

Have staff get up and go to one of the 4 corners of the room. Two will be labeled "TRADITIONAL" and two will be labeled "TRAUMA-SENSITIVE" – teachers can choose. In these smaller groups, have them discuss one of these questions:
- What would happen to this student in a **traditional** school that is not focused on becoming trauma sensitive?
- Given everything you've read, what might be some **trauma-sensitive** proactive approaches and responses to this student?

Share everyone's answers back in the whole group. Be sure to share the following (for trauma-sensitive) if no one does:
Staff would consider this student's behavior may be the result of her experience with toxic stress and trauma, and instead of asking, "What's wrong with that student?" they would ask "What happened to that student?" and "What do they need?" Staff might conclude that she needs to learn emotional regulation skills and communication skills in order to peacefully communicate.

B. Consider Proactive Strategies We Might Adopt at *Our School*

1. Do a large brainstorm of all of the preventative measures the school might adopt.
   - Use newsprint, a screen, or some other way to have someone take notes visibly for the group.
   - Give staff time to review the handouts and conduct a large brainstorm of all the ways individuals and the school as a whole might preventatively address the impacts of trauma on students.

As the leader, you might start with some of your own ideas. See the summary, but here are a few examples:
Here are some preventative measures I've been thinking about to make the school more trauma sensitive:
- *Playing music as students enter the school as a way to calm them down.*
- *Rather than making students wait outside the school, allowing them to enter when they arrive so they can build relationships and complete schoolwork – I will pay teachers who wish to staff this.*
- *I'm thinking of changing the attendance procedure so teachers not only report absences, but they also note which students reported their moods as "not ready for learning" or "I need time to myself." Then we can follow up with the counseling staff.*

2. Have the entire staff walk around the room or the hallways for 2 minutes to take a physical break from sitting.

3. End by recapping on a screen the broad guidelines for what you'd like to see – such as the following:

What Teachers Can Do to Become More Trauma Sensitive
• Use a problem-solving approach and engage students in resolving the problem.
• Look for antecedents to problem behavior. What comes before may point to a possible solution.
• Provide a safe and predictable environment where the teacher's expectations are clear.
• Build positive student-teacher relationships.
• Exhibit unconditional positive regard for all students.
• Focus on students' strengths.

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III. Keep It Up – Build consistent school-wide trauma-sensitive approaches and support teachers

A. Choose Consistent Practices to Implement Across the Grade/Department

1. Ask teachers to get up and meet in either grade-level or department teams. If there are non-teaching staff or teachers who cross grades, plan ahead of time where they should go. As a group, have them look at all of the ideas brainstormed so far to preventatively support trauma-impacted students, and **choose 3** they will commit to implementing across the grade/department. Remind them why consistency is so important for trauma-impacted students. You may want to give them large newsprint to write these down.

2. As a large group, have one representative from each team share their 3 commitments with the rest of the school. Look for overlaps so that eventually some of these practices might be implemented schoolwide. Tell staff you do not expect these practices to be perfect, and for this reason, you've planned a follow-up meeting to share successes and address challenges on this date: _____.

3. Do a check-in break – Have staff first stand for a 30-second stretch break and then write about how they're feeling about all of this – they will NOT have to share but if some people want to, give time for sharing with the person next to you.

B. School-wide **ABC** Approach to Behavior

1. Introduce the ABC approach. While discipline may be too big of a topic to address right now, share with the staff that you'd like to incorporate an ABC approach to whatever discipline process you use right now as a way to raise staff awareness and use a problem-solving approach to behavior issues. Project the following on a screen and ask someone to read it aloud:

> An **ABC** (antecedent, behavior, consequence) analysis to study problem behaviors is useful in discovering why they occur.
>
> An **antecedent** could be a stressor occurring in the classroom (being asked to read aloud) or out of the classroom (it's Friday afternoon, and the student is dreading the weekend in an abusive home).
>
> The **behavior** is likely the most noticeable part of the sequence. It could be anything from tuning out to becoming violent.
>
> Lastly, what are the behavior's **consequences**? A consequence could be intentionally given, like a detention, or less intentional like other students getting annoyed. The behavior might also have consequences that act as rewards (escaping a disliked subject to sit in the hall, or eliciting laughs from classmates).
>
> Once the analysis helps us understand what is happening and why, the staff member can problem solve, possibly with the student, at a calm time, and figure out how to avoid the problem behavior by being aware of the **antecedent**.

2. Have teachers think of an example when a student lost control and in pairs have them work together to try to piece together what the **A, B,** and **C** of the situation were (knowing that the antecedent might have happened at home).

3. For homework: Ask staff to analyze the situation, using the ABC approach, the next time there is a student incident.

C. Leaders Share How They Will Follow Up

Do a big brainstorm asking staff how you can support them in this work and how you might follow up.
Be sure to share your own ideas including:

- When the leaders observe teachers, we will look for more than just academic teaching and learning – we will also observe for a caring and supporting environment, consistent routines, and teacher-student relationships.
- All administrators will have a 1:1 meeting with every staff member in the next 3 weeks to listen to examples of student behavioral incidents and your analysis using the **ABC** approach.

Conclude by doing a full-staff whip around – everyone shares one takeaway from today (just one sentence) going around the entire room. You may also want to ask for feedback on how well you modeled some trauma-sensitive practices in *this* meeting.

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