

Trauma-Informed Approaches

This summary is part of a series produced to support the implementation of the Whole School Approach to Emotional and Mental Well-being. They are intended to help schools make informed decisions when choosing interventions and approaches to improve and promote mental well-being. The interventions and approaches reviewed are not endorsed by Welsh Government or Public Health Wales.

Mae'r ddogfen yma ar gael yn y Gymraeg / This document is available in Welsh

Key messages:

- Trauma-informed approaches aim to improve an individual's self-belief, self-esteem and confidence in making decisions for themselves.
- Schools looking to develop a culture of empathy and create a sense of belonging may consider using a trauma-informed approach for their whole school.
- Trauma-informed approaches can be universal (for everyone), indicated (for individuals at higher risk of experiencing trauma), or a targeted programme (for individuals who may be showing signs or symptoms of trauma).
- The evidence suggests a trauma-informed approach may be beneficial for individuals showing signs they may need additional support (indicated).
- There is limited research available when looking at the effect of trauma-informed approaches on emotional and mental well-being outcomes in schools. Most research was conducted in communities who have experienced severe trauma which is a different context to Wales. This may limit how the findings can be applied.

What are 'Trauma-Informed Approaches'?

There are many different descriptions, definitions and practices associated with trauma-informed approaches as it has developed globally. The trauma-informed model was originally developed in 2001 in the USA by Maxine Harris and Roger Fallot. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA) later developed a working framework for trauma-informed approaches. In Wales, the trauma-informed framework recognises that everyone has a role to support individuals affected by trauma and adversity.

The Framework describes principles of a trauma-informed approach:

- A universal approach that does no harm
- Person centred
- Relationship focused
- Resilience and strength focused
- Inclusive

It also describes recommendations for implementation strategies in Wales. Further information is available from [Trauma-Informed Wales](#).

What aspects of well-being does a Trauma-Informed Approach intend to support?

The approach aims to support emotional and mental well-being through improving an individual's belief in their ability to complete an activity (self-efficacy), self-esteem and the level of control an individual has over events that influence their life (locus of control). More information about mental well-being and the things that influence mental well-being can be found on the [Public Health Wales webpage](#).

How does a Trauma-Informed Approach influence a change in well-being?

A trauma-informed approach is relational and is rooted in kindness, compassion and empathy. If someone is being supported in a trauma-informed way they have trusted relationships that help create a sense of belonging and safety. The whole school can take a trauma-informed approach to help create a non-judgmental culture where empathy is shown through compassionate communication.

Attachment theory underpins the approach. This theory describes how children develop an understanding of themselves, develop emotional bonds and make sense of the world around them through relationships with trusted adults.

What are the implications for schools?

Schools should consider what needs they have in their school community for example improving emotional awareness. These may be identified within existing processes such as reviewing Schools Health Research Network (SHRN) data, whole school approach to emotional and mental well-being self-evaluation, knowledge of learner needs, or school development plans.

When considering learner needs, schools should monitor for any signs an individual may need additional support.

Teachers often have an awareness of learners past or present experience that include trauma or adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and make collaborative choices on how best to support that learner in school, keep them and others safe. Importantly teachers should also know what support is available to them to help them manage their own well-being. When considering what intervention or approaches may help, it is important to recognise that any one stand-alone programme may not fully meet the school's identified needs.

A trauma-informed approach could be considered by schools who have identified a need to build a culture of empathy and create a sense of belonging. Schools may adopt the approach as a means of improving communication. Following a localised incident, there may be need to understand the impact of trauma on the school community and how to compassionately communicate with individuals.

If considering introducing a trauma-informed approach schools could use the Trauma-Informed Framework and ACE Hub Wales resources as a guide. The Framework has four practice levels which describes the different roles individuals or organisations have when supporting individuals who have experienced trauma. These practice levels are described as:

- Trauma-aware: a universal approach that seeks to raise awareness and understanding of trauma.
- Trauma-skilled: For individuals who provide care or support to people who may have experienced trauma.
- Trauma-enhanced: For frontline workers who provide direct or intensive support to people who are known to have experienced traumatic events.
- Specialist interventions: Specialist input personalised for individuals or offered within setting.

If already using a trauma-informed approach, or planning to, schools should think about how they can monitor and evaluate the impact of the approach against identified emotional and mental well-being priorities of the school community.

What do I need to know if I'm thinking of using a Trauma-Informed Approach?

<p>Intended recipients</p>	<p>Depending on the needs of the schools, this approach could be delivered as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A universal programme (for everyone). • An indicated programme (for individuals at higher risk of experiencing trauma). • A targeted programme (for individuals who may be showing signs or symptoms of trauma).
<p>Age range</p>	<p>4 years – adult.</p>
<p>Delivery method</p>	<p>A universal programme can be delivered as a whole school approach. Delivery of indicated may require guidance or support from other agencies. Targeted interventions may be part of a specialised programme from external support.</p>
<p>Resource requirement</p>	<p>There are a range of training providers offering a variety of trauma informed activities and opportunities for schools. These vary from awareness of trauma, to detailed courses with practitioner accreditation. This review did not focus on any one particular provider.</p> <p>It is advised settings in Wales with an interest in becoming a trauma-informed school review freely available resources from ACE Hub Wales via Hwb. Resources include a trauma-aware level e-learning package, training material, and resources to evaluate your school needs.</p> <p>Individual training providers have a range of fees associated with training and development packages.</p>
<p>Language</p>	<p>ACE Hub and Trauma-Informed Wales resources are available in English and Welsh.</p>

Note details are correct as of May 2025.

Further information is available from the following websites: [ACE Hub Wales](#) and [Trauma-Informed Wales](#).

What did we want to find out?

We wanted to find out whether trauma-informed approaches improved emotional or mental well-being of learners and staff in the school community. To do this we were looking for published academic research that measured changes to outcome measures related to emotional or mental well-being.

What did we do?

We searched for academic research papers that looked at whether trauma-informed approaches changed emotional or mental well-being outcomes.

We reviewed papers to identify key information which was summarised and presented to an expert panel. The panel included a range of professionals with experience in Education, Health, Policy and Academia. The panel met and agreed recommendations for this summary based on our evidence identified from the search.

Full details of the evidence review and expert panel decisions are available within the technical report which can be provided upon request. Please email: hi-programme.support@wales.nhs.uk

What did we find?

We found ten academic research papers* that looked at the use of trauma-informed approaches in schools. The well-being outcomes for learners included Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms, depression, anxiety, coping, social behaviours, emotional regulation and behavioural incidents. For staff, outcomes included compassion satisfaction, burnout and secondary traumatic stress. The results are presented by the type of intervention and separated for learners and staff.

Learners:

Universal Approaches - For all learners

It is unclear if the intervention influences emotional or mental well-being outcomes because there is no evidence available. We found one research paper but the research was not conducted well.

Indicated Approaches - For learners showing signs they may benefit from extra support

We found 4 papers that looked at indicated approaches. Indicated approaches may improve emotional or mental well-being outcomes for learners. Improvements are seen in emotional and behavioral difficulties, PTSD symptoms, depression and anxiety symptoms, and coping. However, overall the research was not conducted well.

Targeted Approaches – For learners requiring specialist support

We found one paper that looked at targeted interventions, however confidence in this paper is low because the findings were not clearly reported. Overall, it is unclear if the intervention influences emotional or mental well-being outcomes because there is no evidence available.

Multi-tiered Approaches

These included a combination of universal, indicated and targeted interventions. It is unclear if the intervention influences emotional or mental well-being outcomes because there is insufficient evidence available. There were two studies available but they were not conducted to a high standard.

School Staff:

We found two studies looking at the impact of trauma-informed focused professional development on staff outcomes. This may improve emotional or mental well-being outcomes for staff, through stress reduction, improving burnout, quality of life and compassion satisfaction. However, overall the research was not conducted well.

What are the limitation of the evidence?

The research was conducted in areas with access to fewer resources and opportunities where community members had experienced significant trauma, for example violence or gun crimes. It is difficult to know if this intervention would be effective in Wales because the context in Wales is different to the context in which the research was conducted.

How up to date is this evidence?

Evidence published up to November 2023 was included in this review.

Concluding Statement:

For learners showing signs they may need additional support we found some evidence that trauma-informed approaches may be beneficial.

For school staff there is some evidence that professional development focused on the approach may have a positive effect on emotional and mental well-being.

If considering using a trauma-informed approach, schools should consider the needs of their population and consider what practice level the school would need. This could be having training for staff to become trauma aware or trauma-skilled or seeking external support to offer trauma-enhanced or specialist interventions.

Schools who are considering or already using a trauma-informed approach should consider how to monitor and evaluate the approach against identified emotional and mental well-being needs.

Trauma-Informed Approaches

*References:

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