

# Introduction to Trauma-Informed Care Practices in the Garden

Learning and playing in the garden provides a unique and enriching experience for children, allowing them space to forge connections with nature and develop valuable life skills. It can also become a wonderful setting for positive, healing experiences and relationships for children who have experienced trauma. Understanding the basic principles of trauma-informed care offers garden educators a toolkit to create safe and supportive environments for all children, ensuring that every student feels safe, seen, heard, and valued while participating in garden programs. By incorporating trauma-informed approaches into garden programs before they're needed, educators can create programs that inherently assist with recovery from trauma, resist retraumatization, and help kids cultivate resilience by meeting their needs.



## What is Trauma?

Trauma refers to an emotional, psychological, or physical response to an event or series of events that is shocking, distressing, or harmful. These events are often overwhelming and can have a profound impact on a person's mental and emotional well-being. Trauma can result from a variety of experiences, and different people may respond to similar events in very different ways. What constitutes trauma is highly personal and can vary from person to person depending on their perception and emotional response to a traumatic event. Some examples of traumatic events include but are not limited to:

- **Physical Trauma:** Injuries, accidents, or illnesses that cause physical harm to the body.
- **Emotional or Psychological Trauma:** Distressing events that have a significant impact on an individual's mental and emotional state. This can include experiences such as abuse, neglect, witnessing violence, or going through a natural disaster.
- **Sexual Trauma:** Unwanted sexual experiences or assaults that can have profound and lasting effects on a person's well-being.
- **Developmental Trauma:** Adverse experiences during childhood that disrupt healthy emotional and psychological development, potentially affecting a person into adulthood.
- **Relational Trauma:** Trauma that arises from difficulties in relationships, such as betrayal, abandonment, or chronic invalidation.

Responses to trauma can manifest in many forms, including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), emotional outbursts, withdrawal, difficulty trusting others, and challenges in forming and maintaining relationships. Trauma-informed approaches aim to recognize the impact of trauma and create environments that promote safety, trust, and healing for those who experience it.

## Guiding Principles to a Trauma-Informed Approach

The Center for Disease Control's Office of Readiness and Response and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Center for Trauma-Informed Care co-developed [guiding principles](#) for a trauma-informed approach. These principles are adaptable for any workplace or setting, and below we've put together some simple ways to incorporate them into your garden program.

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**Safety:** Creating a physically and emotionally safe space for both staff and children is essential in garden education. This can be done in a physical sense in several straightforward ways by taking the time to:

- Ensure the garden environment is free from hazards and accessible for children of all physical abilities.
- Establish clear guidelines for safe behavior and safe use of tools. Firm rules about safety in the garden can help kids feel more physically safe, knowing that only safe behavior will be tolerated from everyone else around them. It can also allow kids to feel pride in being trusted with tasks and tools that require personal responsibility.
- Structure classes to support children who may experience sensory overload by offering frequent hand washing, hand and foot coverings, and clear communication that kids can always opt out of an activity if it makes them uncomfortable.

Creating an emotionally safe space is more complex, but providing structure and predictability is a great place to start:

- Make sure kids know precisely what is expected from them while in the garden. Take time to go through garden agreements together before welcoming kids into the space.
- Think about establishing a set structure for garden visits that includes gathering the whole group at the beginning and end of the day. This helps provide kids with a reliable routine and gives you a chance to assess each child's emotional state before and after their visit.
- Make time management your responsibility so projects or activities don't end in a rushed and emotionally escalated way. It's always wonderful to go on tangents with students in the garden if an unexpected question or observation arises. Try to decide ahead of time what part of your program can easily be dropped if time needs to be taken out for delightful detours.
- Establishing consistent attention cues and sharing them with students at the start of the program can also help to cultivate an emotionally safe space for students for whom loud and sudden outbursts from educators might negatively affect their nervous systems.

**Trustworthiness and Transparency:** Building trust is essential in any educational setting, and garden education is no exception.

- Be transparent with children about the goals and activities in the garden, explaining each step of the process. Consistency and reliability in instructions and routines help children feel secure, fostering an environment where they can comfortably explore and learn.
- Just as you set boundaries for safe and respectful behavior, allow children to set boundaries related to any discomforts with the garden. Forcing children to interact with animals or elements they're uncomfortable with, taste things they don't want to, or perform tasks that make them uneasy can cause retraumatization and reinforce negative associations with those things. Consistent long-term exposure and your modeling of positive and low-anxiety responses to animals in the garden, dirt, compost, etc., will help normalize aspects of the garden for kids over time.
- Check in with yourself before interacting with children. We are all human, and understanding our daily moods and personal pet peeves can help in preparing our own emotional tools for remaining calm and patient with students. If you accidentally react rashly towards a student's behavior, remember that a genuine apology is a beautiful way to model repair and healing for children and can go a long way.
- Practice deep listening. When children come to you with questions, issues, or even excitement, pause and truly listen. Ask them questions about what they shared and repeat what you heard. Deep listening helps establish a genuine and trusting relationship with your students.

**Peer Support & Collaboration:** Encourage teamwork and collaboration in the garden. Group activities and shared responsibilities can create a sense of community and support among children. By fostering positive relationships, educators can help children develop social skills, empathy,

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and a sense of belonging, all of which are essential components of a trauma-informed approach. Some simple ways to support student collaboration within your program include:

- Remove competition between students by framing the entire garden as a team project with collaborative goals. Remind students that every task performed contributes to the overall health and success of the garden.
- Create team spirit by choosing team names, huddling up as a team for announcements or directions, and praising the group as a whole for their accomplishments.
- Try adding time for acknowledgments into your routine to give kids the chance to praise each other for positive or helpful actions they noticed another person doing each time you're together.

**Empowerment, Voice, and Choice:** Empowering children with control over their environment enhances their self-esteem and resilience.

- Recognize the individual preferences of each child and honor them. This can be done in many ways by providing opportunities to make choices, such as selecting plants to grow, deciding on garden projects they want to be involved in, or choosing whether or not to taste something that's offered to them.
- Involve children in the formulation of garden rules or agreements. Ask them to share their thoughts on ways to stay safe and be respectful of the garden and incorporate them in your final list.
- Offer children leadership opportunities in the garden that highlight their strengths and enhance their self-confidence.
- Avoid power struggles by abstaining from cajoling children past their expressed boundaries or limits. This is not to say that young children's preferences aren't more fluid while they are still learning about the world and experiencing things for the first time. Educators can still treat each child with dignity and as the expert of their preferences by using empowerment language while offering options and choices for trying new things. It's also great to make it clear that kids have the power to change their minds about something at any time!
- Encourage individual self-expression in the garden through art, journaling, or storytelling, allowing kids to process their personal experiences and explore their identities in a supportive environment.

**Cultural, Historical, and Gender Sensitivity:** It's important to acknowledge that food systems, farming, and gardening have deep historical roots in inequity, and not everyone's associations with these are positive. Rooting your garden program in sensitivity towards all identities and perspectives strengthens it and makes it more inviting and inclusive of all the children and community members who participate.

- Inquire about the needs of your community and craft your policies and programs to meet those needs when it comes to access, programming, and growth.
- Honor the work of farming and growing as noble and highly skillful. When children understand that growing food is hard work and involves expertise, it can help reframe negative perceptions and relationships with agriculture and food systems. Put this into practice and let the kids see you doing and valuing complex jobs in the garden.
- Add gratitude to your food-sharing rituals. Have kids acknowledge and share gratitude for all the hard work that people put into growing the things that you eat together.
- Leverage the healing value of cultural traditions and community involvement in the garden. Incorporate cultural practices, culturally significant plants, language, and more into your programming to celebrate the cultural identities of all the children in your program. Offering opportunities for children to see themselves in the garden creates community and a sense of belonging.
- Invite everyone's whole self into the garden. Each child should be welcomed to express their whole self, to feel seen and safe, allowing them to take full advantage of the opportunities for growth and healing that gardens provide.

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