

CONVERSATION 7

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**SUPPORTING
VULNERABLE STUDENTS:**



**The role of
Personal Safety Plans in
Trauma - Informed Classrooms**

CONVERSATION 7: SUPPORTING VULNERABLE STUDENTS: THE ROLE OF PERSONAL SAFETY PLANS IN TRAUMA-INFORMED CLASSROOMS

By Dr Zoe Wyatt

INTRODUCTION

In modern classrooms, the effects of trauma are often visible as behavioural challenges, emotional outbursts, dissociation and learning difficulties (Perry, 2006). Children who have experienced trauma - whether from neglect, conflict, or abuse - bring these experiences into the classroom, making it difficult for them to focus, regulate emotions, or engage fully with their education (Wright, 2017). Managing these complex needs can be overwhelming for educators, especially when traditional behaviour management strategies fall short (Wright, 2017). Trauma-informed education focuses on emotional safety, trust-building and resilience (Langley-Freeman et al., 2023). Grounded in the belief that behaviour communicates underlying needs, trauma-informed approaches help teachers understand the causes of students' actions, creating a supportive, structured environment where all children can thrive (Brunzell et al., 2023). Research shows that students who feel emotionally safe and supported are better able to engage in learning and develop the necessary academic and social skills for success (Perry, 2006).

This article explores trauma-informed practices in classrooms, focusing on Personal Safety Plans as a tool to support students impacted by trauma. Drawing from trauma-informed work conducted with

Hagar International and the Berry Street Education Model (BSEM), the article examines how safety plans can help students identify safe spaces or people when they feel distressed. While Personal Safety Plans do not resolve academic challenges, they can be a critical tool for keeping students safe in potentially dangerous situations, both at home and in the community (Fisher et al., 2019).

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA ON LEARNING

Trauma significantly affects a child's ability to process information, regulate emotions and engage with the learning environment (Perry, 2009). Children who have experienced complex trauma often display heightened stress responses that interfere with cognitive functioning (Perry, 2009). These behaviours, such as hypervigilance, emotional dysregulation, withdrawal, or aggression, are frequently misunderstood in classroom settings as misbehaviour or defiance (Downey, 2007). Trauma can alter brain development, particularly in areas related to memory, emotional regulation and executive function (Perry, 2006). The constant activation of the stress response system can cause difficulties with concentration, impulse control and problem-solving (Perry, 2006). For trauma-affected students, the classroom can also feel unpredictable and overwhelming (Brunzell et al., 2016).

Trauma also impairs social interactions, making it challenging for students to build trust with peers and teachers (Wilson-Ching & Berger, 2024). This lack of trust can result in disruptive behaviours, such as avoiding tasks, refusing to engage, or disassociation (Wright, 2017). In post-conflict settings like Cambodia, some children who have experienced intergenerational trauma related to war, displacement, or abuse may display these behaviours (Wyatt et al., 2018). Research with Hagar Cambodia found that children can struggle to engage in the classroom due to trauma symptoms, making learning difficult (Wyatt et al., 2018). Approaching these behaviours with a trauma-informed lens allows educators to respond with empathy rather than punishment (Downey, 2007). Trauma-informed education prioritises emotional safety by creating predictable routines and stability, helping students re-engage in learning (Wilson-Ching & Berger, 2024). Strategies like the Personal Safety Plan offer students a practical tool to manage their emotional responses by creating a sense of safety and helping to build trust between students and their teachers (Fisher et al., 2019).

HAGAR INTERNATIONAL'S TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

Hagar International is an NGO that provides trauma-informed care to survivors of human trafficking, slavery and abuse. With 30 years of experience, Hagar's programs focus on empowering vulnerable women and children to recover from trauma through emotional and psychological support (Hagar International, 2023). Research conducted with Hagar Cambodia found that children affected by intergenerational trauma, particularly from war and abuse, often experience difficulties with emotional

regulation and social interaction (Wyatt et al., 2018). Hagar's model emphasises safety, emotional regulation and culturally responsive care to address some of these challenges (Wyatt, 2021).

In addition, Hagar's approach incorporates safety planning as a critical component of their trauma recovery work, particularly for children experiencing domestic or community violence (Hagar, 2020). Research indicates that when safety planning is introduced in school environments, it can create a structured way for students to identify risks, safe spaces and trusted individuals in their environments (Thompson & Trice-Black, 2012). This aligns with broader trauma-informed practices that emphasise emotional regulation and safety in both educational and community settings (Wyatt, 2021).

THE BERRY STREET EDUCATION MODEL (BSEM)

Hagar's trauma-informed care model aligns closely with the Berry Street Education Model (BSEM), which supports trauma-affected students in their re-engagement with education (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2023). Developed by Berry Street, an Australian organisation working with vulnerable children since 1877, the BSEM focuses on creating emotionally safe environments that promote learning through structured support and emotional regulation (Berry Street, 2023; Langley-Freeman et al., 2023). The model is divided into five key domains: Body, Relationship, Stamina, Engagement and Character (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2023). Each domain addresses a critical area of development for trauma-affected students. For example, the BODY Domain focuses on helping students manage their physiological responses to stress through rhythmic activities and grounding techniques that mirror Hagar's emphasis on emotional regulation (Brunzell et al., 2023; Wyatt, 2018).

Research conducted by the University of Melbourne's Youth Research Centre has shown the positive impact of the BSEM on students' emotional regulation, attendance and behaviour, especially for those from vulnerable populations (Stokes & Turnbull, 2016). The study spanned three years and involved both mainstream and specialist schools, collecting quantitative and qualitative data on student engagement, academic achievement and emotional wellbeing (Stokes & Turnbull, 2016). The results demonstrate that trauma-informed models like the BSEM contribute to creating safer and more supportive learning environments for students, helping them move from survival mode into learning mode (Stokes & Turnbull, 2016).

Both Hagar International and the BSEM share a common focus: they recognise that children affected by trauma cannot thrive unless they first feel emotionally and physically secure. These models emphasise the importance of predictable routines, safe spaces and emotional support to foster resilience and facilitate recovery (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2023; Wyatt, 2018). In both contexts, emotional regulation is central to helping students or survivors rebuild their capacity to trust and engage with their surroundings, whether in a classroom or a community setting (Wyatt, 2021; Wilson-Ching &

Berger, 2024). Therefore, teachers play a pivotal role in creating a learning environment where students feel safe, supported and capable of managing their emotions (Wright, 2017).

THE ROLE OF PERSONAL SAFETY PLANS IN TRAUMA-INFORMED CLASSROOMS

Personal Safety Plans offer students a structured approach to self-regulation and safety by helping them identify triggers and develop coping mechanisms (Hagar International, 2020). These plans serve as a bridge between the classroom and potentially unsafe environments, such as homes where domestic violence or community violence may be present (Thompson & Trice-Black, 2012). While not a solution to academic challenges, Personal Safety Plans enable students to take practical steps in recognising when they need support, allowing them to manage distress more effectively. This can reduce incidences of emotional escalation and promote a sense of agency in navigating both personal and classroom environments (Fisher et al., 2019).

PERSONAL SAFETY PLANS: PRACTICAL CLASSROOM APPLICATION

Adapted from Hagar's safety planning model, Personal Safety Plans enable students to identify risks, solutions and resources, enabling them to develop personalised strategies to increase their safety and manage overwhelming emotions or distress (Hagar International, 2020). Teachers can integrate a safety plan into regular emotional check-ins, encouraging students to reflect on situations that make them feel unsafe (Thompson & Trice-Black, 2012). The strategies provided offer immediate, practical steps for managing distress, both within and outside the classroom environment (Fisher et al., 2019).

- **Identifying Safe Contacts and Places:** At the start of a challenging lesson, ask students to identify trusted individuals (like a teacher or school counsellor) and locations (such as a quiet corner) where they can go when feeling distressed.
- **Addressing Risks and Solutions:** Provide students with a simple table where they can list specific emotional triggers (like loud noises or confusion), potential solutions (deep breathing) and resources (a teacher or safe space).
- **Grounding and Reconnection Strategies:** Before a transition, guide students through a quick grounding activity, such as focusing on what they can hear or see, to help them feel more centred and connected to the classroom.
- **Emergency Procedures:** Let students know that if they feel unsafe during class due to any emergency, whether personal, family, or community-related and cannot contact a trusted person, they are allowed to step out to a pre-designated safe area.

- **Regular Reviews:** Schedule periodic reviews, encouraging students to reflect on their safety plans and revise them as needed to better support their emotional wellbeing.

The BSEM highlights the importance of rhythmic activities and grounding exercises to help students move from heightened arousal to a calm state, ready for learning (Norrish & Brunzell, 2023). By incorporating strategies like rhythmic movements alongside Personal Safety Plans, teachers can help students manage stress responses both within the classroom and in more challenging environments. Recent research on domestic violence safety planning shows that structured tools allow children to identify safe places and trusted individuals in crisis situations (Beyer et al., 2022). These principles, when adapted to educational settings, offer an enhanced approach to trauma-informed classrooms, bridging emotional support at school with essential safety measures in unstable home environments (Wilson-Ching & Berger, 2024).

ADDRESSING THE COMPLEXITIES OF TRAUMA-INFORMED PRACTICES

While trauma-informed practices offer essential tools for educators, working with trauma-affected students comes with significant challenges. Trauma manifests in various ways, including unpredictable behaviours such as disassociation, aggression, or withdrawal, often requiring teachers to adapt their approach continually (Wright, 2017). Additionally, creating emotionally safe spaces for students can place an emotional toll on teachers, leading to burnout, especially in under-resourced environments (Downey, 2007). Though tools like Personal Safety Plans offer a structured approach, their effectiveness depends on consistent support and follow-through, which can be difficult to achieve in larger or underfunded classrooms (Thompson & Trice-Black, 2012). These complexities highlight the need for ongoing professional development and realistic expectations around trauma-informed care in schools.

CONCLUSION

Trauma-informed education is not a luxury but a necessity in today's classrooms, where many students are dealing with complex emotional and psychological challenges. For educators, the demands of managing trauma-affected students can be daunting, but the implementation of structured, supportive practices like Personal Safety Plans offers a path forward. By empowering students with tools to manage their emotions, teachers can build a supportive classroom environment where students not only feel safe but also capable of engaging with their learning. The Berry Street Education Model (BSEM) provides a valuable framework for incorporating trauma-sensitive practices into daily classroom life. Grounding exercises, rhythmic activities and consistent routines offer students the opportunity to regulate their emotions, fostering both emotional security and academic readiness. Working with trauma is challenging and the emotional burden on teachers should not be underestimated. However, with the right tools, educators can make a profound difference in the lives of trauma-affected students.

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