

From Primary Prevention to Treatment of Serious Problems: Looking Through A Trauma Lens

(<http://achieve.lausd.net/Page/2170>)

School Mental Health takes a Trauma-Informed, multi-tiered approach to student support. Studies over the last 20 years have made an irrefutable link between exposure to community violence and other Adverse Childhood Experiences, and a host of social academic and behavioral challenges including:

- Decreased IQ and reading ability.
- Lower grade-point average.
- Higher school absenteeism.
- Increased expulsions and suspensions.
- Decreased rates of high school graduation.
- Failing to understand directions.
- Overreacting to comments from teachers and peers.
- Misreading context.
- Failing to connect cause and effect.
- Other forms of miscommunication.

A **single** adverse experience can cause:

- Jumpiness
- Intrusive thoughts
- Interrupted sleep & nightmares
- Anger and moodiness
- Social withdrawal
- Concentration and memory difficulties

Longitudinal studies of Adverse Life Experiences (ACE) such as abuse, neglect, and extreme family instability have also pointed to an impact across the lifespan for those with multiple such ACEs. This impact includes greater risk for health, mental health, and social difficulties, and a shorter life span. Early intervention offered by LAUSD SMH can have a significant, positive effect on these at-risk lifespan trajectories.

An overwhelming number of students come to school with myriad mental health problems that compromise their ability to learn. Research suggests that schools may function as the de facto mental health system for children and adolescents. Nationally, only 20% of children in need receive any mental health services. Of those receiving care, up to 80% receive it in a school setting. More than 25% of American youth experience a serious traumatic event by their 16th birthday, and many children suffer multiple and repeated traumas including: abuse, maltreatment and neglect; traumatic loss; serious accidental injury; experiencing or witnessing violence in neighborhoods, schools and homes; treatment for life-threatening illness (medical trauma); accidents and fires; disasters and terrorism.

Looking through a Trauma Lens, we can see that understanding a child's past experiences allows us to recognize that **behavior may often communicate a student's emotional need**. When we shift away from a deficit approach, exemplified by the question, "What is wrong with a student", and shift to a stance of, **"What may have happened that can explain this behavior"**, we create an opening to begin the healing process.

School Mental Health's Tiered Approach to Student Support

LAUSD School Mental Health (SMH) professionals provide a continuum of interventions that address barriers to learning and enhance healthy development. LAUSD SMH provides comprehensive services that encompass prevention, early intervention, and treatment. These services and programs are provided at school sites, clinics, and Wellness Centers throughout the District.

School Mental Health's Tiered Approach to Student Support



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Universal Interventions and Supports

Interventions and supports at the Universal Level include school-wide mental health promotion and efforts to create a welcoming school culture and climate, a safe campus, school connectedness, and positive behavior.

What Can Schools Do at the Universal Level?

Everyone at a school is responsible for establishing a caring school climate and safe environment. Schools can develop and implement a school-wide positive behavior support and discipline plan consistent with the "Culture of Discipline: Guiding Principles for the School Community" and ensure that it is taught, enforced, advocated, communicated and modeled to the entire school community ([BUL-3638.0](#)).

As schools develop school-wide plans, it may be helpful to understand the five groups of inter-related core social and emotional competencies that Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) programs should address in order to guide policy and practice. The following core competencies have been identified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL):

1. Self-Awareness - accurately assessing one's feelings, interests, values, and strengths; maintaining a well-grounded sense of self-confidence.
2. Self-Management - regulating one's emotions to handle stress, controlling impulses, and persevering in addressing challenges; expressing emotions appropriately; and setting monitoring progress toward personal and academic goals.
3. Social Awareness - being able to take the perspective of and empathize with others; recognizing and appreciating individual and group similarities and differences; and recognizing and making best use of family, school, and community resources.
4. Relationship Skills - establishing and maintaining healthy rewarding relationships based on cooperation; resisting inappropriate social pressure; preventing, managing, and resolving interpersonal conflict; and seeking help when needed.

5. Responsible Decision Making - making decisions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, appropriate social norms, respect for others, and likely consequences of various actions; applying decision-making skills to academic and social situations; and contributing to the well-being of one's school and community.

Taking approaches such as these creates a Trauma-Sensitive School Environment, benefitting all students – those whose trauma history is known, those whose trauma will never be clearly identified, and those who may be impacted by their traumatized classmates.

What does a Psychiatric Social Worker do at the Universal Level?

Psychiatric Social Workers (PSWs) believe that focusing on the strengths, resources, and assets of students, families, and school communities yield greater positive results than focusing on risk factors alone. PSW are trained to provide coordinated, comprehensive, culturally appropriate training and consultation services that focus on promoting a culture that nurtures all students and boosts resiliency factors. Below is a list of services and activities that PSW can provide:

- Classroom presentations (social skills, conflict mediation, grief, anti-bullying, alcohol and other drug prevention)
- Staff development (Psychological First Aid, substance abuse prevention, grief, suicide prevention, crisis intervention, trauma and learning)
- Parent education and training: discipline, gang intervention, child abuse prevention, grief and loss, trauma awareness, Psychological First Aid
- Child abuse prevention training
- School site crisis and threat assessment team participation
- Mental health consultation
- Key member of Coordination of Services Team (COST) participation
- Provide community referrals, linkages and coordination with District and community resources addressing student and family needs
- Universal screening for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and depressive symptoms
- Participate in school site local governing boards and school leadership teams
- Support the school-wide positive behavior and intervention support plan
- Mental Health outreach, promotion and awareness activities

Targeted Support Services

Targeted Support Services are for students who have been identified at risk or are beginning to exhibit signs of emotional and/or behavioral problems. Interventions at this level are designed to counter that risk and promote resiliency, well-being, and academic success.

Providing early mental health intervention in schools has been shown to reduce course failures, reduce dropout rates and transfers to alternative schools. For example, implementing evidenced-based interventions for students exposed to high levels of violence can improve symptoms of child traumatic stress and depression, improving grades and attendance.

What Can Schools Do at the Targeted Level?

- Psycho-educational groups
- Parent conference
- Student Success Team (SST)
- School-based mentoring
- Home visits
- Grade level case conference
- Grade level parent meetings with at-risk students
- Parent education
- After-school enrichment programs

What does a Psychiatric Social Worker do at this level?

- Screening
- [Evidenced-based interventions](#)

- Crisis response (in collaboration with school-based and ESC crisis teams)
- Coordination of Services Team (COST) meetings
- Referrals and linkage to community based services
- Bio-psychosocial assessments
- Early intervention groups
- Parent education and training
- [Infant Preschool Support Services: early identification of students to promote least restrictive environment](#)
- Case management services
- Behavior contracts & weekly school-home reports
- [Mental health consultation](#)

Intensive Support Services

Intensive Support Services are aimed at students who have significant emotional and behavioral barriers and may include: behavior contract/behavior support, individual and group therapy, suicide/violence/threat/risk assessment and management, family outreach and counseling, home visits, case management, and referral and linkage to District and community resources.

What Can Schools Do at the Intensive Level?

- Student Success Team meetings (including follow-up meetings)
- Individualized Education Plan (IEP)
- 504 Plan
- Increased supervision and monitoring of students or locations
- Daily school-home reports
- [Suicide Prevention, Intervention, and Postvention activities](#)
- School-based and community referrals
- Threat / Risk Assessment
- Utilize school-based crisis team

What does a Psychiatric Social Worker Do At This Level?

- Threat / Risk assessment and management
- Crisis response (in collaboration with school-based and ESC crisis team members, and other District services providers)
- [Suicide risk assessments](#)
- [Evidence-based interventions](#)
- [Individual, group and family therapy](#)
- [Teacher consultation](#)
- Coordination, linkage and referral to community-based mental health service programs, psychiatric hospitals, alcohol or other drug treatment facilities
- Serve as a liaison with community-based mental health agencies delivering services at the school site
- Case management, linkage, and advocacy for students and families