



Episode 11: The Link Between Social-Emotional Learning and School Safety

#REMSontheAir Podcast Intro (Recorded): [00:00:00] Welcome to the #REMSontheAir Podcast, hosted by your partners at the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Supportive Schools and its Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center. If you're an old friend, you know us as the REMS TA Center, your national school safety center.

Join us as we chat about key topics in school and campus safety, security, and emergency management with experts and partners from the field.

Janelle Hughes: Hello and welcome back. We are excited to host another REMS TA Center podcast—also known as #REMSontheAir. Today, we are focusing on understanding the link between social-emotional learning and school safety. My name is Janelle Hughes, Project Director here at the REMS TA Center. I'm so pleased to introduce my [00:01:00] cohost today, the REMS TA Center's Training Manager, Amanda Everett.

Amanda Everett: Thanks so much, Janelle. Our mission to support schools, school districts, institutions of higher education, and all the community partners who support them continues. However, as more education agencies pivot between in-person, virtual, and hybrid learning and teaching models, the importance of social-emotional learning techniques has become more evident than before.

Janelle Hughes: You're so right, Amanda, and that's why we wanted to turn our attention to this critical topic in today's episode and discuss how school leaders can work with community partners to address the social and emotional and mental health needs of the whole school community. And this includes both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

And we'll also talk about how this all relates to school safety, security, emergency management, and preparedness planning.

Amanda Everett: The two topics are so interconnected in so many ways. [00:02:00] Today, we will provide an overview of social-emotional learning, trauma, and strategies that can be used to mitigate the negative impacts of emergency incidents using multitiered behavioral support systems, trauma-informed care, and more.

It's no mistake that prevention is listed as the first of the five missions, and that is what we want to talk about today. Specifically, how education agency leaders can integrate a comprehensive set of prevention, protection, and mitigation measures that aim to not only protect school and school district buildings but also provide safe spaces for teachers to teach, students to learn, and safe school communities to be cultivated by focusing on the link between social-emotional learning and school safety.

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We should first start by sharing the definition as cited on the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, our sister technical assistance center. [00:03:00] SEL [social and emotional learning] is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

Research shows that participating in SEL programs improves children’s skills, attitudes, behavior, and their academic performance. SEL initiatives can also reinforce the role of trauma-informed care and multitiered systems of support in contributing to positive school climates. So, the benefits are far reaching.

One specific strategy we will discuss today is trauma-informed care or a trauma-informed approach to prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery. Last June, we hosted a webinar with Dr. Marleen Wong [00:04:00] from the University of Southern California’s Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work to discuss trauma-informed care for schools before, during, and after possible emergency events.

As we’ve shared before, one key objective for schools in the United States is to provide effective educational programming in a safe and secure learning environment, so that teaching and learning can continue, no matter what threats or hazards create short- or long-term emergencies. A major part of supporting students before, during, and after an emergency is ensuring that their emotional and psychological needs are met.

It is truly a challenging time for everyone around the world right now, but SEL has become increasingly important, especially in the face of this pandemic as whole school communities, school leaders, educators, students, families, caregivers, and community partners face new and unique challenges. [00:05:00]

Janelle Hughes: Absolutely.

And we don’t yet know the long-lasting effects or the traumatic effects the pandemic will have. But it’s almost certain that many within the school community will be impacted in different ways. And we need to help schools, school districts, and institutions of higher education be prepared to respond to their whole school community needs.

Social-emotional learning, or SEL, plays such an important role in sustaining a safe and supportive school community and climate, too. When schools and school districts prioritize SEL, they show their commitment to and understanding of the role that student perspectives and experiences play in reinforcing school safety efforts and priorities.

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During the webinar, Dr. Wong discussed how schools can, and in many cases already are, taking a trauma-informed approach. Here's a snippet from the webinar.

Dr. Marleen Wong (Recorded): Oh, and a trauma-informed approach, I want to say, is really [00:06:00] looking at student behavior through a trauma—what we call a trauma lens. Because once schools understand the impact of trauma on students and families and staff, they can begin to recognize and respond by delivering trauma-informed care.

Some of that is already happening, so I don't want to, you know, imply that schools are not doing this. They may, in fact, be doing a great deal of this, and there are certainly subject matter experts in schools today and in the community and children-serving clinics across the country who understand trauma-informed care and can be your local resources.

Just like any other work that we do during post-disaster response and recovery, trauma-informed care can build from what we do in schools every day to nurture a positive [00:07:00] environment that's conducive to teaching and learning, as well as relationship building and trust. Schools can look at the work that they're already doing on school climate and culture and expand it to include this paradigm and the related strategies that follow a disaster.

Amanda Everett: Looking through a trauma-informed lens is critical, and it's going to be so important for schools to provide SEL and trauma-informed care for students, families, and educators who are experiencing trauma, not only from the pandemic but many other types of traumas they have experienced. I think we have been so caught up in the pandemic that we forget what other traumatic experiences students and families are coping with, either from their past or current situations.

Janelle Hughes: Definitely. And in thinking about all of this, I believe it's the perfect time to delve into our topic a bit more. During the webinar with Dr. Wong, [00:08:00] we started the presentation off with a poll question asking how familiar participants were with trauma-informed care in schools. Only 52% of participants were somewhat familiar with trauma-informed care, so that shows that there is a need to share this information and provide much needed resources to schools.

Amanda Everett: Janelle, during that webinar, you provided SAMHSA's [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration] definition of trauma and a great overview of the three E's of trauma. Let's listen to it now.

Bronwyn Roberts (Recorded): I'd like to begin by talking about what trauma is. Individual trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse

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effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being.

And this is a definition from SAMHSA's [00:09:00] *Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach*, which is a great resource and is available on that resource list that you can see in your Handout pod.

So, events may include the actual or extreme threat of physical or psychological harm or severe life-threatening neglect for a child that imperils healthy development. These events and circumstances occur as a single occurrence or repeatedly over time.

Experiences. What is traumatic to some may not be traumatic to others. How we assign meaning to these experiences depends on a variety of factors, including the culture we are from, our personal belief system, the developmental stage we are in, and the resources that are available to us to cope. People who have traumatic experiences feel a sense of powerlessness, humility, guilt, and/or shame. Silencing and a fear of reaching out for help are also very common feelings after a traumatic experience.

And effects. A critical and often overlooked component of trauma is the adverse effects that stem from [00:10:00] trauma. These adverse effects can include hypervigilance, paranoia, or even comatose avoidance, for example.

People can have difficulty coping, struggling to develop and maintain healthy relationships, and regulating their mood and behavior. These adverse effects can occur immediately after the traumatic experience. Or they may have a late, delayed onset. These adverse effects can last moments to years, as we all experience the effects differently.

Amanda Everett: An incredibly helpful resource was just mentioned—SAMHSA's *Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach*, which is the most downloaded document from their Website and a great resource for schools. Dr. Wong shares a lot of excellent information regarding the many types of trauma, whether they are emergency-related, such as natural disasters, or human-caused events, such as adverse childhood experiences, better known as ACEs.

ACEs include abuse, physical and/or sexual; neglect, [00:11:00] emotional and/or physical; or other household challenges such as domestic abuse, parental drug abuse, and even divorce and/or separation, etc. Ultimately, once schools understand the impact that trauma and ACEs can have on students, they can start to recognize the signs and respond by delivering trauma-informed care, which involves integrating this knowledge into their policies, procedures, and especially their practices.

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Janelle Hughes: I agree. Another thing to be mindful of is that trauma doesn't just affect the students or their families, but it also impacts those who are in the role of helping them, which is known as secondary trauma.

Teachers and others in the school setting who may see the behaviors or hear the trauma stories immediately come to mind. There are two types of secondary trauma: compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma. Compassion fatigue is the physical, emotional, [00:12:00] and psychological effects of exposure to traumatic stories or events while helping others and dealing with personal life stressors.

Vicarious trauma is that continued exposure to victims of trauma or the emotional residue that builds up when hearing survivors' trauma stories. Essentially becoming witnesses to the painful event. So, the indirect exposure to others' traumatic experiences can be harmful if not addressed.

Amanda Everett: That's so powerful. Because, like you said, trauma has far-reaching effects, not only during an event like a pandemic or a natural disaster, but long after, as well. As Dr. Wong mentioned, adults deal with stressors differently, either externalizing their feelings or internalizing them. And, in a sense, suffering in silence.

Teachers are our first line of defense in recognizing changing behaviors in their students that are outside of the norm or other signs of stressors. But the same is true [00:13:00] for looking out for themselves and their colleagues. As adults in school buildings, we need to make sure we're taking care of ourselves and our fellow teachers so that we can take care of our students and their families.

Janelle Hughes: Exactly. One quote from Dr. Wong that really stood out to me, Amanda, was when she said, every adult is an important person in a child's life after a crisis or disaster. That brings us to our final topic to share today, which is the connection of SEL and trauma-informed care to school safety and emergency operations planning.

First and foremost, we know that planning must be supported by leadership, so the more informed school leaders are about strategies like SEL and a trauma-informed approach, the more prepared they will be to integrate them into their emergency operations plans. For example, these strategies can be used in the development, revision, and maintenance of the Recovery Annex, [00:14:00] which describes how a school plans to return to a sense of normalcy after an emergency.

Particularly, they are most applicable to the social, emotional, and behavioral recovery. Where a trauma-informed approach is concerned, planning teams should also engage school staff and

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community partners, such as local mental health professionals and other youth-serving organizations in the planning process.

Amanda Everett: Absolutely. You are so right, Janelle. And there is one additional group of important stakeholders that schools can include in their planning, especially at the high school level: their students. In a recent newsletter, we linked to a webinar on a program called Teen CERT, a community emergency response team, which is a nationally supported and locally implemented program that teaches teens how to be prepared for hazards and trains them on basic disaster response skills. Some local education agencies have integrated it into the school setting. It's so [00:15:00] important to engage high school students in this training to empower them with these lifelong emergency preparedness and response skills, which also teaches them responsibility, organization, and can help develop their future potential for careers.

In fact, today's students are tomorrow's education agency leaders and emergency managers, and when they feel they have a voice, students are more likely to feel connected and contribute to school safety goals and missions.

Janelle Hughes: Oh, that is so true, Amanda. Thank you so much for reminding us about that important role that students can play in this important work.

Amanda Everett: Well, thank you, Janelle, for today's podcast session. It's important to know that Federal—also important to know that Federal resources are available for social-emotional learning and to support students and families experiencing trauma. The Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary [00:16:00] Education (OESE) and its technical assistance centers offer various resources to support education agencies with strengthening SEL programs. Please check out our latest newsletter for links to resources and to learn more about our technical assistance centers that support this important work.

Janelle Hughes: Yes. Thank you so much for listening. And when you have a chance to visit our Website, rem.ed.gov, to hear the full webinar with Dr. Wong and to learn more about incorporating these efforts into your school emergency operations plans.

We've covered quite a lot related to social-emotional learning and trauma-informed care and while we were unable to cover everything, if you have any questions regarding these topics or any school safety or preparedness topics, please do not hesitate to reach out to the REMS TA Center via our toll-free phone line 1-855-781-7367 or email [00:17:00] us at info@remstacenter.org, and we will be more than happy to provide technical assistance in response to your inquiry. Thank you for tuning in to the *#REMSontheAir* Podcast.