Leading with Compassion: Building Trauma-Informed Pyramid Model Programs

By: Jaclyn Joseph, Dameri Watson, and Julia Sayles

Children and families experience and process trauma in different ways. You may never fully understand a family's story, and that is okay. Trauma-informed care does not require anyone to be a detective—it is about creating systems and relationships that foster safety, trust, and healing. As a leader, you are essential in creating systems and relationships that support all children and families. Leading trauma-informed Pyramid Model programs is about how you consistently "show up" every day, asking yourself:

"How can I ensure every child, family, and team member feels safe and valued?"

Trauma-Informed Leadership Practices

As a leader, when you focus on trauma-informed practices, you play a crucial role in creating a program where every child, family, and team member can experience success, including those impacted by trauma. SAMHSA's six principles of a trauma-informed approach are the foundation for the five practices described below. They are adapted for Pyramid Model programs to offer specific ways to lead with care and compassion in early childhood settings. Some practices may be more important than others for your program as you continue to support the healthy development and well-being of children, families, staff, and yourself.

Create a Trauma-Informed Culture

A culture of care begins with consistency.

► **Share the Commitment** by making trauma-informed care central to your program's mission and daily work. Help your team understand why trauma-informed care is important for every child and family. Discuss this commitment regularly—in daily conversations, staff meetings, family communications, and program materials—to show that it guides everything you do.

► **Prioritize Safety, Trust, and Transparency for Everyone** through clear policies, consistent processes, and predictable teaming routines. Build trust by making decisions together with families and staff. Ensure your program welcomes and supports all team members, children, and families.

► **Promote Curiosity** by taking time to understand what shapes each child's experiences. Learn about families, community strengths, and daily realities. Ask thoughtful questions, listen carefully, and stay open to discovering new ways to support each team member, child, and family.

Example	Ideas
Co-Create a Shared Statement of Commitment	Partner with staff and families to write a statement about your program's commitment to safety, connection, and relationship building. Make it something everyone feels ownership of. Gather family perspectives through multiple approaches such as surveys, focus groups, and informal conversations. Ensure all communications and materials are available in the languages families use at home.
Trauma-Informed Onboarding	Include training in trauma-informed practices in your orientation for new staff. Pair newly hired staff with mentors experienced in trauma-informed care to provide guidance and support.
Trauma-Informed Policy Reviews	When reviewing policies, consider how they may inadvertently cause stress or create barriers for children, families, or staff. For example: • Adjust attendance policies to allow flexibility for families navigating trauma-related challenges or transportation issues. • Ensure staff dress code policies respect preferences and individual expression. • Seek to understand and respond to your team's unique needs and realities (e.g., lengthy medical appointments, neighborhood circumstances, complex family responsibilities).

Reflective Questions

- Does our shared purpose prioritize relational work as much as technical outcomes?
- What daily program practices ensure predictability and connection?
- How are our policies and onboarding processes responsive to the unique strengths, priorities, and needs of our community's children, families, and staff?

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Let Families Lead

Families are experts in their own experiences.

▶ **Honor Family Voice and Choice**, and when families share parts of their stories, listen while respecting that families do not need to share everything with you for support to make a difference.

▶ **Invite Families to Share and Collaborate** by asking for their insights, preferences, and priorities while honoring their comfort and availability. Make participation accessible by offering flexible options that work with their different schedules and preferred communication methods.

▶ **Center Family Strengths** by recognizing each family's unique values and practices. Focus your communication on highlighting family contributions and capabilities rather than challenges.

Example	Ideas
Family Advisory Committees	Bring families together to form an advisory group that guides policies, events, and program improvements. Offer support to ensure families feel prepared and confident in their roles.
Strength-Based Communication	Help staff learn to reframe the feedback they provide about children in positive ways. For example: • Instead of saying, "Your child has trouble staying still," try, "Your child is curious and enjoys exploring the things around them."
Family Events that Fit	Plan events with families to celebrate them. Consider providing on-site child care when possible.

Reflective Questions

- How do we show families they are respected and valued as partners in our program?
- Are we adapting our practices to reflect family strengths, values, and preferences?
- Are there family voices we are not hearing? How can we reach out, listen, and create space for them to join the conversation?

Support Staff Growth and Wellness

Caring for ourselves allows us to provide better care for others.

▶ **Prioritize Staff Well-Being** by creating spaces for staff to manage stress and build resilience throughout the day. Provide flexible schedules, mental health resources, and regular opportunities for staff to pause, reflect, and practice self-regulation. Support individual needs while promoting a culture where interdependence is as valued as independence.

▶ **Create Growth and Learning Opportunities** by ensuring all staff can access professional development and mentorship that matches their goals. Connect team members with community resources focused on trauma-informed practices and provide opportunities for them to learn from each other's experiences. Prioritize practical, real-world applications that staff can use right away.

► **Build a Culture of Support** by making time for staff to share successes, work through challenges, and learn from one another. Recognize contributions regularly and meaningfully, showing you value each person's dedication and growth. Create an environment where everyone feels appreciated and encouraged to develop their strengths.

Example	Ideas
Create Wellness Space	Share resources like mindfulness apps, guided journals, or information on accessing mental health services. Start team meetings with grounding exercises. Establish flexible scheduling options for healthcare and family needs.
Foster Mentorship and Peer Learning	Match new staff with experienced mentors who share similar experiences or approaches. Schedule regular peer check-ins focused on growth and reflection and create opportunities for staff to learn from each other's successes and challenges. Use real-world scenarios in training to practice trauma-informed responses.
Celebrate Growth and Success	Highlight staff accomplishments in meaningful ways (e.g., meetings, newsletters, personalized notes) to show their value to the team. Create space in team gatherings for sharing personal and professional wins.

Reflective Questions

- How are we helping staff manage daily stress and prioritize their well-being?
- What additional support might our team need?
- How are we nurturing authentic connections among staff?
- What opportunities exist for meaningful peer support and learning?

Promote Collaboration and Collective Decision-Making

Collaborative decisions are stronger decisions.

▶ **Be Open and Transparent,** making decisions with staff (and families when appropriate) as much as possible. Share the reasoning behind decisions. You will build trust by helping people understand the 'why' behind changes and choices.

▶ **Encourage Shared Ownership** by creating regular opportunities for staff and families to help shape program policies and practices. Their experiences and insights are valuable, and when they are genuinely involved in program decisions, the whole community is strengthened.

Example	Ideas
Policy Review Committee	Form a small group of families, staff, and leadership to review policies as a team and ensure everyone is represented.
Respond to Feedback	Use anonymous surveys or suggestion boxes to collect staff, families, and community feedback. Communicate how feedback influences decisions to show staff and families that their voices matter.

Reflective Questions

• How are we making our decision-making processes open and clear to everyone?
• How do we meaningfully include families, staff, and other community members in shaping program policies and procedures?
• Do all members of our community have access to opportunities for collaboration? If not, how can we create them?

Use Data-Informed Decision-Making for Trauma-Informed Systems

Our data tell the story of our impact.

▶ **Gather Feedback Regularly** using formal methods (surveys, focus groups) and informal check-ins to understand what is working and what needs to change. Create multiple ways for staff and families to share their experiences, perspectives, and ideas so everyone can be heard.

▶ **Look for Patterns in Your Data** by reviewing family engagement, staff experiences, and children's progress to identify areas that need attention. Consider how different program practices affect various community members and what adjustments might help everyone succeed.

▶ **Act on What You Learn** by using feedback and data to guide improvements in your trauma-informed practices. Share these changes openly with your community to build trust and to show how their input makes a difference.

Example	Ideas
Program Experience Review	Use program data to identify where adjustments might help all children and families have better access, experiences, and outcomes within your program. Work with staff and families to develop solutions that strengthen trauma-informed care and support everyone in the program community.
Feedback Loops	Engage families, staff, and community members in discussions about data findings to ensure shared understanding and next steps. Create transparent systems to share what you have learned from feedback and show how it shapes program decisions.
Trauma-Informed Data	Track factors such as staff stress levels, family satisfaction, or the consistency of safety practices to measure progress. Gather qualitative information, such as staff and family stories, to capture the impact of trauma-informed practices.

Reflective Questions

- Are we meaningfully collecting feedback from all parts of our community?
- How do we make sure data are guiding improvements that are trauma-informed and that represent every child, family, and team member?
- Are we all clear about how feedback and data shape program decisions and changes?

Leading trauma-informed Pyramid Model programs is not about knowing every story or having all the answers. It is about showing up consistently with empathy, creating systems prioritizing safety and trust, and understanding that we all learn and grow through relationships. A trauma-informed culture develops through small, intentional actions repeated over time to create an environment where children, families, and staff feel valued, supported, and connected. Your approaches will evolve, and your role as a leader is to guide your program with purpose and care to create spaces where everyone can reach their full potential.