

# A Trauma Informed Approach to Evidence-Based Programs

*Tip Sheet for CAPP and PREP Programs in New York State*

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## **Introduction**

As an educator, you cannot be prepared for everything, but by adopting a trauma-informed approach you may be able to avoid a few potential facilitation pitfalls. As we know now, many young people have experienced or live with trauma. In particular, LGBTQ youth, youth in the foster care or juvenile justice system, young people of color and young people living in poverty are more likely to experience trauma. Discussing sensitive topics as they do in comprehensive sexuality education programs may put them at risk for re-traumatization. A trauma-informed approach can help create a greater sense of safety and empowerment among participants, allowing them to be more open to learning the information you are there to share, and avoid possible re-traumatization. This document will help you better integrate a trauma-informed approach into your program and activities.

## **Principles of a Trauma Informed Approach**

There are six guiding principles to consider when looking through a trauma-informed lens. They are: **Safety, Trustworthiness, Choice, Collaboration, Empowerment, and Cultural, Historical, and Gender Considerations.**

## **General Guidelines**

**Preparation and Set-up:** How are you preparing before you start? Always assume there will be at least one participant who will greatly benefit from this trauma-informed approach.

- Try to get to know the composition of the group before you arrive.
- Make sure you discuss with the teacher or site coordinator what the process is for students who need to excuse themselves.
- Prior to starting the program, know what support services are available to students. If going into a school, let the guidance/counseling office know you're starting programming soon, in case they see an increase in visits to their offices.

**Setting:** Where you do programming can impact how safe participants feels as well.

- Is the space itself welcoming? What is the "emotional temperature" in the room? Does it feel open or confined?
- Do the images in the room reflect the group you are working with and express inclusivity? (e.g. a rainbow flag, positive images of youth of diverse backgrounds)

**Language:** Does the language being used feel **safe** for *all* participants? Is it inclusive?

- For example, using binary and heteronormative terms can make a young person feel as though this is yet *another* place they are not welcome or seen. Consider changing "boy/girlfriend" to "partner" and "male/female" to "person with a penis or person with a vagina." (**Cultural & Gender**)
- Is the language being used **empowering**? When talking about the "responsibilities of choosing to have sex," are you also affirming that we know many young people have sexual experiences that are *not* a choice?
- Be explicit and clear about program structure and topics that will be addressed in different modules. This will help young people prepare themselves to use coping strategies if necessary. (**Transparency**)

**Examples of Activities:** *Not all activities listed are in all EBPs. These are just examples. If you would like to use any of these or infuse a trauma-informed approach into an EPB in another way, it is considered an adaptation and should be put on a master list for approval.*

### **Group Agreements: (collaboration, safety, empowerment, and choice)**

- Mention at the start of the program that this can be sensitive information, or even stressful for some people.
- If school policy allows, explain that if someone gets uncomfortable, they can leave the room to take care of their needs.
- Be sure to truly brainstorm the group agreements *with* participants. Explain that a “brave” or “safe” space is a **trusting space where everyone is always emotionally and physically safe but may be challenged at times** – even creating a space like this requires bravery for some, especially if they carry trauma related to these topics. Explain that it’s everyone’s responsibility to create this space in the room. Some peers may already have experienced abuse or negative consequences related to sex, sexual health, or a relationship.

### **Transmission Game**

- Educators can prep the group for this activity. Explain that you make no assumption about anyone’s HIV or STD status. Let participants know that this activity is not about singling out the source of an infection or making fun of people who get infections – it’s about how easy it is for STDs to spread in a community, and it is only an exercise. However, individuals who don’t want to receive a letter and walk through the transmission game should be given the **choice** of making their own group and participating in the discussion questions together. After the game, reinforce the concept that all forms of sex always require consent.
- Discuss activity with teacher in advance for insight on which students should or shouldn’t get certain cards.

### **Condom Use Skills Demonstration**

- Remind them they have a **choice** in participating in the practice.
- Emphasize consent as an absolutely essential step in condom use.

### **Negotiation Skills**

- Offer participants a choice as to whether they would like to use Option 1 (randomly chosen pairs of volunteers), Option 2 (randomly chosen pairs practice assigned roleplays and then volunteers demonstrate their scenario), or Option 3 (two teams, and volunteers from each team are coached by other team members while acting out the roleplays). Also notify participants when a scene can’t be made gender-neutral (such as when it involves birth control).

### **Agree/Disagree**

- Remind youth **prior** to the activity that these statements are based on opinions. There aren’t right or wrong answers, just different views based on experiences and understanding, and they might end up on different sides of the room. Facilitators should avoid stating that an answer is correct.
- Some educators have done this activity anonymously, using a worksheet with a discussion afterwards.