



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQ)

What is childhood trauma?

Childhood trauma describes an event or events that can have negative, lasting effects on a child’s mental and physical well-being. Trauma causes stress, which is anything that disrupts the physiologic or emotional balance of a child.

Potentially traumatic events can include (but are not limited to):

- Physical, sexual, emotional abuse
- Physical and/or emotional neglect
- Divorce
- Domestic violence
- Family issues (mental health, incarceration, substance abuse, death)
- Witnessing violence or its aftermath
- Witnessing drug-related issues
- Food insecurity
- Racism
- Bullying
- Chronic poverty
- Homelessness

Childhood trauma and the resulting stress can interrupt normal brain and body development; undermine a child’s focus and ability to learn in school; increase risk for engagement in maladaptive or disruptive coping behaviors and involvement in the juvenile justice system; and increase risk for chronic mental and physical health problems.

Do children in your community/school face trauma and does it affect their ability to learn and well-being?

Yes. Probably more than you may be aware of on the surface.

A recent national survey of the incidence and prevalence of children’s exposure to violence and trauma revealed that 60% of American children have been exposed to violence, crime, or abuse. Forty percent (40%) were direct victims of two or more violent acts. Prolonged exposure to violence and trauma can seriously undermine a child’s ability to focus, behave appropriately, and learn in school. It often leads to school failure, truancy, substance use, suspension or expulsion, dropping out, and/or involvement in the juvenile justice system.

Even when the link is not obvious or direct, trauma often underlies or is an important contributor to problematic behavior.

Why should police, school, and mental health personnel care about childhood trauma?

Trauma impacts everyone either directly or indirectly.

Childhood trauma can impair a child’s brain development, socio-emotional and behavioral development, academic learning and achievement, and overall health and well-being.

Childhood trauma and related stress can impact a child’s brain development, which can in turn affect their stress response; ability to interpret social cues and language; basic biological functions such as the ability to wake, sleep, breathe, and relax; and ability to plan, use language, and engage in problem-solving. When responding to the stress of trauma, a child’s normal developmental process is interrupted. The body responds to stress in a “fight, flight or freeze” mode. Repeated or chronic activation of stress hormones is literally harmful to the developing brain. Children who are exposed to chronic stress often exhibit responses that come from survival brain systems and bypass the rational, or “thinking” systems long after the trauma has ended.

Children facing trauma and related stress at home face higher referrals for behavioral problems, special education, and diagnosis for ADHD, as well as absenteeism, suspension or expulsion, dropping out, substance use, and criminal activity. Trauma can impair focus, complex thought and learning, resulting in lower grades, more suspensions and expulsions, and school failure. Children with trauma are 2.5 times more likely to have repeated a grade in school. Trauma triggers can reoccur for years or over the entire lifespan, increasing risk for engagement in unhealthy coping behaviors, such as substance abuse, early sexual activity, domestic violence, and involvement in the juvenile and criminal justice system.

Children with histories of traumatic experiences are twice as likely to have chronic health conditions. Children and adolescents who have experienced traumatic or other adverse circumstances have higher rates of smoking, substance use, teen pregnancy, suicide attempts, anxiety, depression, obesity, heart disease, diabetes, cancer, stroke, asthma, lupus, viral infections, and autoimmune diseases.

Helping children overcome trauma and succeed in school requires an understanding of children’s physical, emotional, and cognitive capacities and the creation of healing relationships and interventions in schools and early child care settings.

Our Responses to Traumatized Kids Matters

When we recognize that a child has experienced a traumatic event or other circumstances of adversity, we can make a difference in their recovery and response to such events. Understanding the links between trauma and potentially problematic outcomes enables us to respond to children in ways that are much more likely to be helpful and less likely to reactivate trauma than simply providing negative consequences. Recognizing trauma can help us better understand behavior, provide the right kind of support, and avoid or minimize unnecessary conflict.

What is Handle With Care?

Handle With Care (HWC) is a program that enables local law enforcement to notify school divisions when they encounter a child on a scene who, as a result, has been exposed to potential trauma. School personnel and mental health partners can then provide appropriate trauma-sensitive interventions immediately.

Handle With Care has three simple elements:

1. Law enforcement officers send notification to schools.
2. Schools receive notifications and prepare trauma-sensitive support.
3. Mental healthcare providers partner with schools for support.

The goal is to assist schools in helping children exposed to trauma focus, behave appropriately, and learn.

See the *Handle With Care Fact Sheet* and *Handle With Care Program Requirements* for more information.

What is expected of law enforcement in Handle With Care?

The Handle With Care process is initiated by law enforcement when a school age child is present at a scene with law enforcement or other emergency responders. It is the duty of law enforcement to send a confidential notification to the school division or childcare provider. This immediate action can have a major impact on the child's well-being and ensure they receive the services they may need.

The confidential notification, which is documented in the police report, contains just three pieces of information: the child's name, age, and school, as well as a message to "Handle With Care." The Handle With Care Notification Form also includes the following statement: "The child referenced below was on the scene of a police or emergency services response in the last 24 hours and could exhibit academic and emotional and/or behavioral problems as a result of exposure to this traumatic event."

Details about the incident are not shared with the school. Law enforcement will provide notification on every child that meets the criteria for "Handle with Care."

What is expected of schools in Handle With Care?

Schools should create a process to receive such notification and prepare a process for trauma-sensitive support.

A school division, school, or childcare provider will create a process to triage Handle With Care notifications from law enforcement. The process will involve forwarding the Handle With Care Notification from law enforcement to the appropriate teacher and/or counselor and staff to observe the student's behavior and academic performance and be prepared to provide trauma-sensitive support as needed.

For example, a student who is acting out might be sent to the counselor or nurse instead of through disciplinary channels. A student who is inattentive might be given more individualized attention. A student who is unusually quiet might be provided additional attention or support. Although schools are expected to provide trauma-sensitive training to all personnel, teachers are not expected to become counselors and counselors are not expected to become psychologists. This is why partnerships between schools and mental health professionals are especially beneficial.

What is expected of mental health providers in Handle With Care?

Mental health providers should support, assess, and/or make recommendations for further support services.

When school interventions are not sufficient, mental healthcare professionals, who are knowledgeable in trauma focused therapy, can provide therapy on site at school at a time that is least disruptive to the student's academic schedule (with consent from the parent or guardian).

If a student continues to experience behavioral/emotional/academic issues in the classroom, a school-based mental healthcare provider (school counselor, school social worker, etc.) will determine if mental health services are appropriate. A referral to follow-up services for the child and caregivers can also be facilitated if needed.

How are student and family privacy protected?

The notification to the school will include only the student's name, age, and school, along with these three words: "Handle With Care."

No details of the incident are released to schools.

How does Handle With Care help children?

Supportive responses from caring adults buffer the harmful effects of trauma or potentially traumatic events.

When all school personnel—administrators, teachers, counselors, nurses, cafeteria staff, custodial staff, bus drivers, etc.—understand the impact trauma has on a child and are equipped with trauma-sensitive approaches, they can help students feel safe and provide understanding and support. A sense of emotional and physical safety is essential for students to be able to focus, behave appropriately, and learn.

Through the Handle With Care program, schools receive notification from law enforcement to provide trauma-sensitive support and, when needed, connect students and families to mental health services to mitigate negative effects experienced by children's exposure to trauma.

Handle With Care sets schools and childcare agencies up to be proactive, rather than reactive. With informed, caring personnel ready to share their calm, rather than contribute to the student's chaos, the outcomes of a traumatic situation would likely be minimized. This can reduce disciplinary action and absenteeism while building resilience, self-respect, and confidence.

Because children respond to trauma differently, the Handle With Care program ensures all children with notifications are treated with care and without judgment.

How much does it cost to start Handle With Care?

Zero! Training and materials are provided at no cost by the DCJS Virginia Center for School and Campus Safety. It does require the cooperation of a team of school, law enforcement, and mental healthcare stakeholders. Teams must meet the basic program requirements of the West Virginia Center for Children's Justice, which first began the Handle With Care program in 2013.

What are the program requirements for starting a Handle With Care program?

See the HWC Program Requirements ([insert hyperlink when approved](#)).

How long does it take to start Handle With Care?

It depends. If all stakeholders are onboard from the beginning of discussions, the Handle With Care program can be running within a few weeks of the initial training.

What is the history behind Handle With Care?

2009	The Office of Juvenile Justice & Delinquency Prevention’s study on children’s exposure to violence was a wakeup call on how prevalent children’s exposure to violence is in their homes, schools, and communities.
2010	U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder, who served in that role from 2009–2015, launched the Defending Childhood Initiative (DCI) to address a national crisis: the exposure of America’s children to violence as victims and as witnesses.
2011	The West Virginia Children’s Justice Task Force, in collaboration with the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the South District of West Virginia, formed a subcommittee to explore the problem of children’s exposure to trauma and violence and programing to mitigate the negative effects of trauma. The subcommittee was named the WV DCI Task Force. The DCI Task Force, comprised of policy makers and practitioners, researched national programs and DCI initiatives. They relied on the Safe Start Initiative program in Brockton, Massachusetts, and the evidence-based National Drug Endangered Children Program to develop “Handle With Care.”
2012	The DCI Task Force worked with law enforcement, prosecutors, educators, mental health providers, child protective services, probation officers, court personnel, school nurses, school attendance directors, and counselors to develop the Handle With Care program, write protocols for law enforcement and school staff, and to create guidelines for implementation.
2013	Handle With Care was piloted at Mary C. Snow West Side Elementary School in Charleston, West Virginia. The school, situated in an urban area of the city plagued by drug and violent crime, ranked 398 out of 404 elementary schools in West Virginia for poor performance. About 93% of the school’s 500 students came from low-income families.
2014	Handle With Care gains interest in West Virginia and from around the country.
2015	The West Virginia Center for Children’s Justice was created to facilitate the expansion of the Handle With Care program. They created a website with easy access to information, forms, and protocols on the program.
2015 – 2019	Sixty-five (65) localities across the country implement a Handle With Care program in their area.

Beyond Handle With Care, what else can I do to make my school more trauma-sensitive?

- Join your community's Trauma-Informed Community Network (TICN) or other trauma informed initiatives.
- Create a resource directory of local public and private services for student and family referral.
- Create a task force to take steps towards becoming a trauma sensitive school (more information can be found here: www.fact.virginia.gov/trauma-informed-schools-resources)
- Provide trauma-informed in-service and training for school personnel and parents.
- Adopt alternative discipline practices (more information can be found here: www.doe.virginia.gov/support/student_conduct/2019-student-code-of-conduct.pdf)
- Reinvest in resources from school resource officers to student support services, including mental health staffing and programs.
- Improve access to mental and behavioral health services.
- Implement a social and emotional learning curriculum (more information can be found here: www.doe.virginia.gov/support/prevention/social-emotional)

What if I have more questions that are not answered here?

Visit the Virginia Handle With Care website at HandleWithCareVA.org
or contact the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice services (DCJS)
Virginia Center for School and Campus Safety:

Betsy Bell, *K-12 Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Programs Coordinator*
(804) 997-1658
betsy.bell@dcjs.virginia.gov

Kim Simon, *SRO/SSO Training and Program Coordinator*
(804) 997-1717
kim.simon@dcjs.virginia.gov

