

## Case Vignettes: A Supplement to the Trauma Informed Handbooks



The purpose of these case vignettes is to illustrate examples of how the concepts in the Handbook can be implemented. The human experience means struggling with concepts that are new and considered out of the box. Learning new concepts can best be taught through story. Attaching real people to real concepts makes the learning curve easier.

Each student is created based on real-life stories. While the student is fictional, the details could be Any Student in Anywhere, USA, at any Connection School. The students are also not gender specific. We operate from the philosophy that any gender of student could present with the challenges listed below.

We will take each student through the various parts of the Handbook to illustrate the various ways these new strategies can be implemented. We will add thought-provoking questions on how implementing a new handbook cannot just be a black and white, concrete experience. There are many grey areas and thoughts that need to be considered at each level, for each student. The use of the Regulation Rooms are scattered throughout the Vignettes.

Please note that every decision made for each student is based on the background information of that student. We must take into account ALL that a student shows up with each day.

Meet our students.

#### Elementary level:

Charlie is a Kindergarten student who is the oldest of 4 children and the first to attend school. Charlie lives with both biological parents.

Taylor is a 5<sup>th</sup> grade student who is the youngest of 2 children. Taylor lives with biological mother, comes from a divorced family, and witnessed domestic violence for several years early in childhood.

#### Middle school level:

Alex is a 6<sup>th</sup> grade student who was born addicted to substances and adopted at birth. Alex lives with both adopted parents and is an only child.

Hayden is an 8<sup>th</sup> grade student who is the middle of 3 children, living with dad. Hayden's mom died last year. Hayden watches his youngest sibling so dad can work evenings to make ends meet.

#### High school level:

Logan is a 9<sup>th</sup> grade student who is the oldest of 2 children and lives with biological mom and dad. Logan works a part time job after school to help with various family bills.

Jordan is a 12<sup>th</sup> grade student who is homeless and lives with a friend's family. Both parents were incarcerated and have a substance use disorder. Jordan has bounced around among homes for several years and is committed to graduating.

## BACK TO SCHOOL NIGHT

Many Back to School Nights involve a presentation by an administrator to a bigger audience, often welcoming families, providing encouragement and excitement. First impressions are lasting impressions, especially for those who are hypervigilant. This is a wonderful opportunity for Administrators and Assistant Administrators to:

1. Acknowledge the differences that each student brings to school.
2. Begin using trauma-informed language.
3. Introduce the new handbook and point out some of the new concepts.
4. Inform families (parents/guardians) that each Handbook will be signed by a school official as well as the families (parents/guardians) and students.
5. Reassure families (parents/guardians) that the *Connection School* is committed to safety, trust, restorative practices, and education.

Charlie's family arrives with all the nervousness of new parents going through a rite of passage for the first time. How do we do this? Will we screw it up? We couldn't find a sitter for the others. How do we communicate any needs that we have? Who is our point of contact?

Taylor's mom is arriving with the weight of the world on her shoulders. Who in this community knows her business? Who read the police report? Will the teachers treat her student differently? This is a new school. Will her student be accepted and fit in? Who is safe for her student to talk to at this school?

Alex's family arrives filled with hope that this is a new start with new teachers. Middle school can be overwhelming for some, but Alex's elementary years were so difficult, middle school cannot be worse. Alex has sensory issues and this middle school is supposed to use strategies to help students like Alex. Will the Administrator talk about that? Will the teachers we meet this evening understand our student's history? How can we partner to set Alex up for the best success? Who will be our ally?

Hayden comes to back to school night alone this year. Dad is working and the other siblings are at home. Hayden wants to make a good impression and wants teachers to see that mom's death will not impact the academic experience. Hayden hopes to connect with familiar faces and see the adults who supported their family last year during the loss of mom.

Logan's family eagerly attends the high school back to school night. High school is one of those experiences that parents try so hard to prepare their students for. Logan's parents want to know how the students will be protected from bullying. How will Logan succeed academically? Who will be the academic counselor? Who will help Logan achieve his goals? Logan works a part-time job to help the family out. Do the parents tell someone at school or just keep it to themselves? What happens if Logan is tired the next day or cannot complete all of his homework in time?

Jordan arrives late to back to school night. Jordan was not going to attend since last year's was so awful. There is one teacher who believes in Jordan. This one teacher has held Jordan together through so many challenges. Jordan is determined to show up for this teacher.

## STRENGTHS AND STRUGGLE SURVEY

This survey will be part of the school registration paperwork packet. Each school needs to be prepared to go through these surveys and provide guidance or strategies as needed based on the results of the survey. Let's see how this might play out for each of our students.

Charlie's survey was completed with all of the Kindergarten registration forms. Parents did document that Charlie's dad often travels for work and is out of town for a week at a time. *This is an important detail for the teacher to know going into the school year. Charlie may need some extra support or skills teaching for how to navigate these transitions.*

Taylor's mom has filled out and returned the survey. In the responses, she wrote, "Taylor has witnessed many years of domestic violence and can be sensitive to male adults figures. Taylor's father and I have divorced and there is currently no contact with him." *This student should immediately be on the radar of the Connection Team so that Taylor can be surrounded by caring and connection from day one. Taylor's team should also be made aware of the history with male adults.*

Alex's survey also was returned at the beginning of the year. The answers included, "Alex was adopted at birth and survived drug addiction. Alex has many sensory issues that can contribute to a lack of emotional regulation. Please talk with our family therapist and occupational therapist to get more information on additional tools to help Alex be successful." *The multi-disciplinary team for this student MUST have someone on it who understands sensory issues and the depth of how they impact a student's experience at school. Each team member has to be open to learning about how to best meet this student's needs in the classroom.*

Hayden's survey has not come back yet. The Connection team knows that Hayden's mom passed away last year. *Setting up a home visit with Hayden's dad, at a time convenient to him, makes the most sense on how to tackle collecting the information on the Strengths and Struggles Survey. It's critical for the Connection Team to identify Hayden's strengths so they can build on these and help Hayden move from trauma to resiliency. The home visiting team should be compassionate school officials who like Hayden and have a relationship with this student.*

Logan's survey was returned with the initial school paperwork. Comments from parents include, "Logan has started a part-time job in the evenings to help our family with some financial issues. We would like to be proactive and have a plan in place for how to address any tardy or homework concerns." *This family is attempting to problem solve before any problems have occurred. Setting up a meeting right away could be useful. Include Logan in this meeting. Make sure all teachers are on the same page. Align with Logan to support this student to navigate through this difficult family situation.*

Jordan's survey was not returned. The Connection Team knows that Jordan's life is complex and the family (parents/guardians) is not available to complete the survey. *The Connection Team could identify who in the school has the best relationship with Jordan. That person could connect one on one with Jordan and fill out the survey together. There is more to this process than meets the eye. Jordan will see*

*the care and concern of this individual in meeting to complete this survey with such important questions. This process also allows Jordan to identify individual strengths and advocate for self as needed.*

## DAILY SCHEDULE

Daily schedules are crucial for providing structure and predictability. For anyone who has experienced trauma, these two things are particularly important for calming the parts of the brain that get dysregulated. That said, the schedules in the school setting are not a “one size fits all” situation. Some students need some flexibility in their schedules to allow for additional skill building related to social situations or additional co-regulation for the setting presented.

Here are some examples of holding the structure and predictability of the daily schedule and meeting the needs of students who may need some flexibility in that structure.

The Kindergarten daily schedule in Charlie’s class actually meets the needs of Charlie most of the time. The only stress that occurs is when there is a transition to the specialist classes. Charlie gets nervous about the teachers because they are not as familiar. Once the transition occurs, Charlie does just fine in class. It’s the transition that triggers the escalated behavior that looks like stomping, refusing to leave the classroom, becoming completely silent. *There are several strategies that will help solve this behavior. A few examples include weekly lunch date with the specialist teachers to get to know them better, allowing Charlie to have extra time to transition (leaving 5 minutes earlier than everyone), and putting Charlie in a leadership role that allows Charlie to be a peer mentor and lead the students to class.*

Taylor successfully navigates the 5<sup>th</sup> grade daily schedule. However, about three months into the school year, there is a change in the paraprofessional who oversees the lunchroom. This paraprofessional is a stern male who uses a loud voice to prompt and redirect students who are dysregulated. This activates Taylor’s stress response system and causes a change in behaviors for Taylor. Taylor begins reporting stomachaches. Homework stops being completed. Absences begin to increase. *The Connection Team notices a change in behavior after 4 absences and asks for a meeting with Taylor and mom. Taylor still did not feel comfortable or safe in telling what the trigger was. However, mom was able to ask questions about Taylor’s daily schedule and the team was able to recognize that having a new male in the schedule is connected to the timeline in changing of behavior. Taylor requested to eat lunch in the regulation room with a caring, connected paraprofessional that Taylor feels safe with. Over the next two weeks, Taylor returned to baseline and regained safety at school.*

Alex has been placed in teacher’s classrooms that have alternative seating options. This is useful for the student to be able to tolerate the classroom schedule and having options to calm the sensory system. Alex’s teachers are aware of the sensory issues presented, thanks to mom’s excellent communication. *Each teacher has alternative coping strategies available as needed. A few examples might be head phones to block out noise, mandala coloring sheets for movement to focus, mints or hard candy to provide a sensory system experience that blocks out other stressors.*

Hayden has a history of being able to navigate the daily schedule with no issues. This year is different as the stress Hayden is carrying to school is more. *The team has talked with Hayden and are allowing Hayden to go to the Regulation Room any time throughout the day, no questions asked.* Hayden is still responsible for all academic requirements, however, these may be completed in the Regulation Room

instead of the main classroom. This has given Hayden the permission needed to breathe, take a break, and manage the stress carried from the death of mom and the additional responsibilities at home.

Logan loves attending school and is excited for the daily schedule of classes. Logan finds that the predictability of the daily schedule is helpful to ensure that academic requirements are met when Logan is late or misses class due to the part-time work schedule. *Logan was given a study hall for first period to provide some leeway in case Logan is late to school.*

Jordan's daily schedule is completely different than most Seniors. Because of Jordan's homelessness, many absences in previous years have occurred. Jordan is now in a situation where credit recovery is crucial and important. *Jordan's school counselor and Connection team have created an alternate schedule that allows Jordan to meet additional academic requirements in order to recover credit.* For example, Jordan receives credit for any books read and book reports completed. Jordan also receives credit for a weekend, part-time job. Lastly, because Jordan has found housing independently, without the help of families (parents/guardians), and contributes to that household in a meaningful way, the team has worked with the adults in the household to assist Jordan in receiving credits for life skills (similar to a Family and Consumer Science independent study class).

## **MORNING MEETINGS/ADVISORY CLASS**

This concept can be used for so many reasons: collecting data and information about a student's social-emotional health, allowing students to have and practice empathy and compassion for other students, empowering students to own their stories, allow students to advocate for their needs.

Charlie loves the morning meetings: Listening to the experiences of friends, giving hugs and handshakes, sharing their own stories. Charlie is learning so much about social and emotional skills. Charlie also really likes it when the teacher participates because she is so smart about how to handle siblings and bedtimes and not getting to go for ice cream when we want.

Taylor initially dreaded the morning meeting because there was an implied expectation that everyone participate. However, Taylor's teacher had an amazing approach that allows the class to start with a seemingly neutral topic and dig deeper as needed. Taylor has been able to participate through observation and as Taylor feels more comfortable, can share when ready.

Alex was paired with a teacher whose classroom has many alternative seating options and calming lights. Alex is so thankful for this. Sometimes the sensory issues can be really distracting and moving or drawing can be helpful. During advisory class, Alex enjoys the structure and participates more readily when the body is calmer.

Hayden used to like Advisory class, but now is hesitant and lacks confidence because of the death of a parent. Hayden was relieved when the school counselor gave the choice of which teacher Hayden wanted to have for Advisory. Hayden chose the teacher that felt the safest and knew the most details. Then, there wouldn't have to be any explanation. In an interesting turn of events, there are 3 other students in Advisory who have also experience the death of a loved on. It's so nice to know there are others who have experienced the same thing.

Logan appreciates that Advisory class is 2<sup>nd</sup> period. Because Logan works late sometimes, getting to school on time can be difficult. Advisory class is important for connecting with friends and having it 2<sup>nd</sup> period is helpful so there's no missing of important discussions. Logan's class is made up of other students who work and have developed credit recovery agreements with the school officials. This is inspiring and hopeful to Logan.

Jordan hates Advisory class. Jordan told this to her favorite teacher and they agreed that the best plan would be to have Jordan be a Student Aide in an Advisory class for lower classmen. This allows Jordan to utilize leadership skills and strong personal skills, but gives Jordan the necessary space needed from peers with whom there is little in common.



## ATTENDANCE

Charlie gets to school every day. However, tardies are common. Members of the Connection Team did a home visit with the family and identified that there are 3 younger siblings and mornings are hard to navigate. It was determined that the family was missing Charlie and wanted to spend as much time as possible together, including the entire family sending Charlie to school each day. The Administrator happened to know the family who lives next door and knows that they have a 4<sup>th</sup> grade student who rides the bus. The Administrator asked the parents if he could navigate a meeting with the other family to see if the 4<sup>th</sup> grade student could be a “bus buddy” to Charlie. Giving the family permission to use that resource, assisting them in finding a solution that worked for everyone, and asking for help has resolved the tardy issues.

Taylor loves going to school. School provides a break from the family stress. Attendance does not become an issue until the change in the paraprofessional at lunch. See the information in previous sections to see how the challenge was addressed. The team meeting was critical for navigating this sensitive topic.

Alex attends school regularly and has no issues with getting to school. This is completely different than the last several years of school. Because the Connection team and teachers have worked with parents in understanding Alex’s history, they were proactive in creating a safe, connected learning environment. This has curbed any attendance issues.

Hayden was extremely nervous about school starting because Hayden has needed a lot of alone time to process mom’s death and manage emotions. When the school counselor told Hayden that the Regulation Room is available anytime, no questions asked, this gave Hayden the space needed to stay at school. Hayden’s initial plan was just to skip school when the stress was too much. Being at school is a much more positive plan than skipping.

Logan’s attendance is an issue at times. It’s really a tardiness issue, not an attendance. Because Logan works late sometimes, getting up and getting to school can be an issue. The school staff does not realize that Logan’s dad had a medical diagnosis that has caused huge financial strain. Logan does not quite feel connected enough to anyone yet at the school to disclose this. However, when the school allowed study hall to be the first class, this was extremely helpful and Logan wants to be at the school as soon as possible. The other thing that Logan noticed about the school is that there are credit recovery options for students who work. This could be an option for Logan as needed.

Jordan’s attendance is so much better this year due to finding stable housing. However, it’s still hard to be excited to get to school every day due to the overwhelming amount of work Jordan needs to complete. Jordan has actively participated in meeting with the Connection team to navigate all of the difficult and complicated pieces of graduation. The team has allowed Jordan to take a break and land in the school library as needed. As long as Jordan is accountable to every teacher and logs the time in the library, Jordan can utilize this space to manage the distractions and teen drama at school. It’s a bonus that Jordan has a great relationship with librarian.

## **DISCIPLINE**

You have seen many discipline practices peppered throughout this document. Remember, discipline means to teach. The end goal is to teach the appropriate behavior expected while meeting the internal needs of each student.

The strategies for this section are endless. Please see the Appendix for additional resources regarding strategies and interventions that are appropriate to use in trauma-informed schools.

Charlie

Charlie's development and history is important to know because it plays into understanding the root of Charlie's behaviors. Typical behavioral issues that occur in Kindergarten often happen during transitions out of the regular classroom and back into the regular classroom, less structured times, and places where students do not have as much supervision, or know the adults as well. Typically, these times include getting ready to leave a location, any specialist, recess, lunch, and before and after school.

Students will need multiple repetitions in order to be successful during these times. Students will also need co-regulation from adults who understand their needs as well as give them multiple opportunities to practice. The best time to practice new skills is in a predictable, structured manner, not in the moment or in the crisis.

For example, let's say Charlie is really struggling at recess with keeping hands to self and staying in one's own space. Instead of sending Charlie in for every minor infraction, let's connect him with an older student mentor who Charlie can "shadow" at recess for a week and then that mentor can "shadow" Charlie. This gives Charlie the needed role modeling of behavior at school as well as a trusted older peer who can give Charlie feedback and respond to Charlie's behaviors in a helpful manner.

Taylor

Taylor's developmental history and the experiences in the family are crucial in understanding the root of Taylor's behavior. Because of the sensitivity of Taylor's situation, people may not discuss all of the details. Yet, it's crucial to know how witnessing domestic violence at such vulnerable stages of development can impact sensory system development as well as emotional regulation development.

Typical responses from students who witness domestic violence witness include shutting down and this look like defiance. There can be a drop in heart rate. Students may avoid men or avoid situations where they think there's no control over that situation. Discipline will need to involve one on one discussion and relationship building with the teachers. Having a solid, single adult for Taylor to check in with in the mornings and at the end of the day will be a helpful addition to this discipline. The Connection Team will need to understand victims of domestic violence. The team will also need to understand tone of voice and eye contact, both from Taylor's reception of those non-verbals as well as the way Taylor communicates non-verbally.

For example, Taylor was in music when two students started arguing and the teacher firmly put an end to the argument. The teacher then immediately returned to teaching and asked Taylor to perform. Taylor did not respond. Taylor stared blankly at the teacher. The teacher verbally prompted Taylor several times, but Taylor just seemed checked out. The teacher asked Taylor to go to the regulation room. Taylor complied.

After engaging in several regulating activities, Taylor was able to talk to the regulation room teacher about what occurred. The teacher was able to help Taylor give the music teacher some feedback and information about how the music teacher's voice reminds Taylor of all of the violence that used to occur at home. They were able to repair the relationship and identify other ways Taylor can let the teacher know there's a regulation break needed.

Alex

Students whose development was critically altered or impacted during in utero development are sometimes the most difficult to understand. Because these students often do not have a current stressor, adults often think, "they are fine, there's no reason for this, they are just being manipulative." The reality is that the stressor occurred in utero and the student has no ability to verbalize what is occurring internally.

For example, let's say that Alex outwardly and strongly refused to attend a school assembly. To some adults, this may look like blatant defiance. When those adults attempt to interact with Alex and persuade this student to attend the assembly, the behavior escalates as teachers tried to force the issue and offer no sound alternative. One teacher wants Alex suspended. Alex ends up in the Administrator's office.

Because the Administrator understands in utero trauma and the impact on the sensory system, the Administrator asks Alex what is stressful about attending the school assembly. Alex has a positive relationship with the Administrator and this is not their first interaction. Thus, Alex feels emotionally safe enough to respond honestly. Alex states, "The sounds are very overwhelming and when I sit with all of those students in the gym at one time, I feel like the world is closing in on me." The Administrator offers Alex a couple different solutions, "Alex, what if you can just listen to your earbuds during the assembly? And, what if you sit on one of the chairs against the back wall instead of the in the stands." Alex agrees to give it a try at the next assembly and thanks the Administrator for thinking of some ideas to help the situation.

After the Administrator talks to the team of teachers, the teachers apologize to Alex for not understanding the situation and ask how they can repair their relationships with Alex and rebuild trust.

Hayden

Since the death of Hayden's mom, Hayden has been very stressed, with lots of pent up emotions. Hayden has also become a very protective older sibling.

An incident happened between classes with another student who saw Hayden crying earlier in the day. The student made fun of Hayden and Hayden lost it, becoming physically aggressive. The other student has a history of pushing people's buttons. Hayden does not have a history of aggression. This is a first time incident.

Hayden lands in the Administrator's office and is asked to explain what happened. The Administrator listens to what has occurred and then asks Hayden how often there are thoughts about dad and missing dad. Hayden states, "all day, every day." The Administrator offers Hayden time to work through those feelings of grief in that moment and then asks Hayden how they can fix what has occurred. Hayden asks if there can be a meeting set up between the two students so the other students can understand more fully what is occurring in Hayden's life. The Administrator agrees to reach out to all of the families (parents/guardians) involved and arranges a meeting between the two students, with the support of the school counselor.

Logan

Not all discipline has to be long and drawn out. Some things are very quick to respond to with clear limits.

Logan got involved in a peer issue where other students were gossiping about another student. Logan heard two other students talking about another student and told them to stop. The other students escalated the situation by calling Logan names. Logan started yelling and telling them to stop. A teacher got involved and was able to separate everyone and de-escalate the situation. Logan then talked with the teacher about what occurred. All of the students apologized to each other and life went on, business as usual.

Jordan

Jordan arrived late to school. A teacher confronted Jordan and the first words out of Jordan's mouth were, "f\*\*\* off," frustrated that the teacher has no understanding of all the pressure Jordan is under or all of the pieces Jordan is navigating. Jordan turned a paper in late and got 20% taken off. Jordan got angry and exploded. In former ways of thinking, a school administrator may have suspended Jordan or put Jordan in ISS for a few days for all of the explosive and inappropriate behaviors.

In a trauma-informed school, the Connected Team will look at the bigger picture, meet with Jordan, and get to the bottom of what is happening. The team will work with Jordan to put in strategies that help with emotional regulation or ensure that Jordan is getting basic needs met. The team will also set clear expectations of how Jordan can express feelings safely and appropriately and/or how to work out any issues with the teachers.

## About the Author

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