

# An Introduction to Trauma-Informed Girl Scouting

Sources: American Psychological Association & National Child Traumatic Stress Network

## What is Trauma?

Trauma is a psychosocial and emotional response to an event or events that are deeply disturbing.

A traumatic event is a frightening, dangerous, or violent incident that poses a threat to an individual's life or bodily integrity. Witnessing an event that threatens the life or physical security of a loved one can also be considered traumatic.

### Traumatic events may include (but are not limited to):

- Experiencing war or a significant natural disaster
- Experiencing physical, sexual, or emotional/verbal abuse in childhood
- Experiencing physical, emotional, medical, or other forms of neglect in childhood
- Witnessing a caregiver abuse substances or struggle with mental health issues during childhood
- Experiencing parental incarceration or separation during childhood
- Witnessing violence at home or in the community
- Trauma related to migration or refugee experiences
- Experiencing traumatic death or loss of a loved one
- Experiencing a significant accident or medical event

### Indicators of Trauma in Children and Teens:

- Feelings of depression, anxiety, self-blame, sadness, worry, guilt, shame, and hopelessness
- Hypersensitive or hyposensitive to danger
- Inhibited or passive social behavior, increasing isolation, or withdrawal from peers
- Psychosomatic complaints (stomachache, headaches, etc. with no medical cause)
- Aggression, defiance, and disobedience
- Declining school performance or truancy
- Distrust of adults or clinging to adults (even those recently introduced)
- Concentration and memory deficits
- Increased risk-taking behaviors
- Self harm and suicidal ideation



## What is Trauma-Informed Care?

Trauma-informed care involves understanding, recognizing, and responding to the effects of all types of trauma. Trauma-informed care acknowledges that people often experience many different types of trauma in their lives, and it upholds that people who have experienced trauma need support and understanding from those around them.

## Trauma-Informed Girl Scouting

By being aware of what the children in your troop may have experienced, you can help better respond to their needs. Below are some blanket ideas to implement that follow the principles of trauma-informed care:

**Create a safe and predictable space** by providing consistency in expectations, schedule, and routine.

- Keep the same meeting days, times, and leaders to be present for the Girl Scouts.
- Follow the same structure for each meeting: Opening (Promise & Law), Troop Business (snack, attendance), Program Activity, Closing (reflection, meeting reminder, and closing circle).
- If any changes are taking place, let the children know as soon as possible with as much information as possible.

**Check-in!** Get to know Girl Scouts as individuals so you can identify their norms, strengths, and when something is going on for them.

- **Tip:** If a child doesn't seem like themselves, it would be a good time to check-in with them.
- **Instead of asking:** "What's wrong? What's the problem?"

**Try:** "Hey, I noticed that you seem a little more quiet than usual and didn't want to sit next to your friend while eating snack. How are you feeling today?"



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## Strategies for Managing Behaviors through Trauma-Informed Girl Scouting

When working with Girl Scouts around difficult behaviors, try calling them in (into a conversation), not out (on their behaviors).

- **Instead of:** "Hey, Girl Scout! Stop doing that!"

**Try:** "Hey, Girl Scout! We're about to start our next activity— come join us!"

If redirecting a behavior, use short and clear instructions for the desired behavior. Explicitly state what behavior you expect to see from them; this does not leave the child guessing what the replacement behavior should be. When giving instructions, make sure to only give one at a time to avoid any confusion. Once the child completes step 1 to the instruction, you can provide another short and clear directive.

- **Instead of:** "Girl Scout, stop getting up. Throw away your snack, and sit down for our activity."

**Try:** "Girl Scout, please sit in this chair."

Use positive reinforcement in troop meetings! Providing behavior-specific praise is very important in shaping behaviors for the whole group. Can we point out what the Girl Scouts are doing right instead of what they may be doing wrong? This positive reinforcement about a specific behavior will increase that behavior for the Girl Scout that you're praising and for the whole troop!

- **Instead of:** Non-Specific Praise such as, "Awesome"; "Way to go"; "Good job"; "Nice work"

**Try:** Behavior-Specific Praise that can sound like: "Thank you so much for sharing that thought with us." ; "You just provided a really great answer about Juliette Gordon Low. I can tell you were really paying attention."; "You were being a great sister Girl Scout by helping your friend with the activity."

**Remember, kids want to do well!** When in doubt, refer back to the Girl Scout Promise, Law and Troop Agreements to help the child guide their behavior accordingly.