Why Trauma-Sensitive Schools?

Interview of Jen Alexander, MA, NCC, RPT. Elementary School Counselor, Lead Trainer for ATN’s Creating Trauma-Sensitive Schools Program
Interviewed by Julie Beem, MBA, Executive Director ATN

Julie: Hi, everyone. This is Julie Beem of the Attachment & Trauma Network, and we're here today with another interview from the Educating Traumatized Children Summit, an online gathering of expert voices in how to provide trauma-informed school experiences to children. This summit has been created by the Attachment & Trauma Network’s Creating Trauma-Sensitive Schools Program.

We're pleased to have Jen Alexander to talk to us today about why we need trauma-sensitive schools.

Welcome, Jen.

Jen: Thank you so much for having me.

Julie: Let me tell you a little bit about Jen before we get started.

As a blogger, a lead trainer with ATN’s Trauma-Sensitive Schools Taskforce, a practicing school counselor, and the adoptive parent of a traumatized child, Jen Alexander is passionate about being a leader in the movement to create trauma-sensitive schools. She has over 15 years of experience as a practicing school counselor, a play therapist, and formerly as a special education teacher, all in Iowa, as well as nearly a decade of experience parenting a severely traumatized child whom she adopted.

Jen speaks both locally and all across the country on the topic of creating trauma-sensitive schools, and is also writing a book for educators on the topic.

So, I can think of no better person to ask this question to. Why do we need trauma-sensitive schools, Jen?

Jen: Thank you so much for hosting this summit and helping us get the word out about this very important movement, Julie. I would love to be one of the people who helps talk about why you need trauma-sensitive schools.

To me, the answer comes here - creating trauma-sensitive schools is all about cultivating hope. It's hope for all students to be able to learn at high levels, but it's also creating hope for educators, to help them rekindle the reason that they came into education and this profession in the first place, to be able to help the masses of all students in our
schools, including the many traumatized youth, who come into every single classroom every day of across the nation and need educators who both understand them and know how to help.

As we build this hope for students and for educators, we’re making a difference, not only in the lives of our students, but also our families and that, in turn, builds hope and promise for our futures, our future together, really, in our communities.

**Julie:** Okay.

**Jen:** So many students, and sadly, educators may not understand how much trauma is impacting the concerns they may see with students in the classroom every single day.

**Julie:** Got it. Well, it’s interesting that, as I read in your bio, that you are an elementary school counselor in Iowa, and I’m sure that a lot of us from other parts of the country are thinking, "Okay, she’s in Iowa. Small-town, farming, Iowa," and yet, you are somebody who’s passionately concerned about trauma, and you call it a public health crisis. Can you explain how you know that?

**Jen:** Well, we know from the research, when it comes to adverse childhood experiences, and also a lot of the research related to childhood trauma in general, that trauma impacts masses of students in every single classroom every day.

In fact, we know that at least one in four students has been traumatized. That includes having experienced exposure to psychologically distressing events that involve some degree of intense fear, terror, or helplessness that kids might have been exposed to. For many students, these traumatic events relate to circumstances involving physical abuse, sexual abuse, childhood neglect, domestic violence, neighborhood violence, medical trauma, living in poverty, or seeing some natural disasters, or situations related to war.

What we know is, there are many different kinds of situations that can create trauma for youth, and any child is at risk of developing difficulty in their functioning as a result of those events, if and when they experience them. Different students and children respond in different ways to events. It’s a very subjective kind of experience, but we know that these events are common across all states, across all areas, whether it’s rural or urban, and across income levels, across all different kinds of ways we might group people or think about people.

Trauma can happen to anyone. It can affect any child or teen, and in that way, we have students coming into every single school who have been traumatized every day. It’s
really time for us to really think of it in terms of, how can we make sure everything we do as educators, from the minute students may walk in the door to the minute they leave, what can we do to make our environments the healing, safe places that they need so that they are able to learn?

**Julie:** Mm-hmm. I agree, and thank you. Thanks for pointing out that trauma is in all demographic groups and in all different areas because I think people don’t have a sense of how widespread it truly is.

**Jen:** I agree with you, and I think sometimes, any of us educators or not ... We continue to have this belief that trauma may be something that impacts a child if they're in an accident or if we know they've experienced some type of abuse at one point in their life.

What we don’t realize, sometimes, is that we have many, many children and teens who are coming into school every single day who are experiencing trauma. We may not know it, but the effects are still there. Those kids need us to understand them. They need us to understand what works and why so that we can help them be successful in our school.

**Julie:** Mm-hmm. Okay. So, can you talk to me specifically about the type of trauma that seems to be both the most prevalent and the most pervasive, and that is a complex trauma, or the trauma that happens early? Could you give us a definition and what that looks like?

**Jen:** Certainly. For many students, the trauma that they experience happens not just once, but it happens repeatedly, over time, and it happens within the relationships that we would hope you would be able to rely on for safety, security, and comfort. What happens with children when they experience this type of long-term, prolonged, stress-response system is that their bodies are reacting in a stress-response, which is what happens with all of us when we experience some kind of threat or stressor.

For students who are experiencing prolonged trauma, it's not stopping. It may not happen every day, but even if it's happening some one day, and some another day, and some another day, these children are experiencing prolonged stress-response systems in their bodies.

If they don’t have, for whatever reason, the supportive relationships that they need to help buffer the effects of that stress, or that trauma, they can develop what you just referred to - complex trauma, or what some of us talk about as being developmental.
trauma. What that means is that, the trauma is impacting students on many levels, in many different domains, including in their bodies.

So, prolonged trauma, complex trauma, or developmental trauma - whatever you want to call it - causes changes to the way the brain and body work. It can change the physiological responses that are happening within kids, and because of those responses, it can change the way youth's brains and bodies are developing, which then impacts future functioning.

When we think about how these kids are growing up and developing, the effects can be varied according to the child, but they can go across many different domains. For instance, many children who have experienced trauma have difficulty regulating their emotions. By regulating, I mean difficulty turning them up, turning them down, keeping their bodies in a state of calmness and balance where they can use the upstairs part of their brain, if you will, to be able to learn.

When we talk about a stress response happening, for any of us when that happens, that's activating the downstairs part of our brain. In order for kids to be able to learn, we need them to have their downstairs brain regulated so their upstairs brain can learn and do its job. With many students who have been traumatized, this type of regulation within the brain and body is very difficult for them and that can lead to different things happening on an emotional level.

We might see students who feel their emotions in a really big way all the time. They may overreact to things. They may have difficulty communicating and act out the emotions and the energy that they feel within their body.

Other students, because their emotions are so overwhelming to them based on the trauma they've experienced, they may not have the experience of secure enough relationships that help them learn to regulate those emotions or experience the regulation of those emotions. They may actually turn those emotions off.

So, we can see, really, a gamut, if you will, of symptoms with kids where they might feel too much, or they might not feel enough at all. Those emotional-regulation difficulties can then impact the behaviors that we see at school.

As educators, we're trained to pay attention to behavior. We're trained to help students with behavior, but unfortunately, too many times, educators don't have an understanding of the "why" that goes with behavior. So, what might be happening on a physiological level that's leading to the behavior that we're seeing? When we miss that piece, or when we don't have that piece, the interventions that we put in place may not be what is best for that student, especially if that student has experienced trauma.

We know that trauma affects the body. It affects emotions. It affects actions. But it also affects students' ability to learn. It affects their thinking and can lead to many different difficulties when it comes with learning content and skills in school. Beyond that,
trauma definitely impacts how students view themselves, how they feel about themselves, and it impacts their relationships built at home and at school.

**Julie:** Mm-hmm. Certainly.

**Jen:** Really, what needs to happen is that we need to help educators understand all of these effects so that we can then help educators know how to help these students. We all, as educators, went into this field because we want to make a different with kids. We want to help all kids learn at high levels, and in order to do that, we have to be paying attention to the mood of the many traumatized students we have in our schools so that we can be what they need, provide the interventions that they need, and help them succeed.

The really extra-cool thing and bonus that comes from this is the kinds of things that we can put in place to help traumatized students are going to help *all* students, because most often what's good for a traumatized student is good for all kids.

**Julie:** And that is really the bonus, isn't it? I hope you'll get to say that again as we talk through some of the specifics about what educators should be doing in trauma-sensitive schools because it means that it's easier for you to enact in a school-wide way because it's not going to hurt the other kids, right?

**Jen:** That's right. It's going to help them.

**Julie:** So, what are the tasks? What should educators do to make their school trauma-sensitive?

**Jen:** Well, one of the things that I am writing about in my book is what I call the Four Tasks of Creating Trauma-Sensitive Schools. I believe that as educators, if we want to help kids learn at high levels, all kids, including those many whom have been traumatized, we have to tend to these four tasks and we need to them in this order, and here's what they are.

Our job is to help students feel safe. Not just be safe, but feel safe.

We need to help all students be connected. That means we need to help them develop healthy relationships with one another and with adults within the school community.
Once students are feeling safe and are connected, we need to help them get regulated.

When I talked about how the physiological changes that happen with traumatized youth, the dysregulation that can happen within the body and especially the downstairs brain, we need to build capacity within our schools to teach all youth how to regulate their stress-response systems. They need to understand that they have a stress-response system and they need to understand what to do to help themselves when they may feel stressed.

That goes with helping students learn those skills, but helping educators learn those skills, too, because we're facing this crisis on a public-health level but also on an educational level. We not only have highly stressed students in our schools, but we have highly stressed staff who need support and need understanding so that they can develop the regulation skills to be able to regulate themselves and then be able to help their students.

Once we have students and staff feeling safe, being connected, and getting regulated, then and only then will we be able to help students use that upstairs brain so that they can learn.

**Julie:** Awesome. In fact, as you're going through this, I'm just thinking, "Man, that's such a great framework."

We at ATN are especially proud of that framework because Jen has been so gracious to let us use that as part of our overall training when we go into the schools, and we have some of our materials and curriculum build around those concepts.

So, how does this work? How often do you do these tasks, and what do they look like, these four steps of feel safe, be connected, get regulated and learn?

**Jen:** That's a great question, and it's really something that we do every single day as educators when we are being trauma-sensitive.

It's not like we pack up safety and then we move onto regulation, and then we tackle learning from there. It's really about looking at each piece every single day and then going forward and going back when we need to.

It's really a dance, the dance of attunement is what we call it in the trauma world. We're learning to read ourselves and our students to figure out what they need in the moment, both as individuals, but then as a class family as well.

For instance, if we're looking at what we do with youth in terms of kind of two different directions - we can look at the whole realm of prevention, but then we can also look at intervention. So, if we look at prevention, one of the things that the counsellors in our
district do is that we build in lessons that focus on making sure as a district we have safety built in for students and we're helping students to feel safe.

In terms of classroom lessons, whether those are led by classroom teachers or by school counselors, we're focusing some of our activities, and interventions, and core instruction on building relationships. That can look like class meetings that begin the day in every single homeroom, where students greet one another, and practice important relationship skills that build a positive school culture, where students feel and experience relationships coming first.

Then, the lessons that we focus on are social-emotional skill lessons that help students learn communication skills, learn those relationship skills that will help them be successful in school but also later in life. We can also build in lessons that focus on teaching all students how to regulate because all kids need help learning those skills. We all learned them as youth, or some of us learned them as we were older, too, but we have to help all kids develop those skills.

Then, as we start to look at that foundation of safety, connection, and regulation, then we have kids who are ready to participate in the academic learning that schools are all about. When we're thinking academic learning, it's so important to not just think about the core instruction, the reading, writing, math, and other areas of the core, but we also need to be thinking about, how can we help students develop those executive function skills. That's critical as well.

Once we tackle the preventions, we have that piece in place for all kids. We need to look at multi-tiered systems of support for meeting the individual needs of students who may have experienced trauma to varying degrees, and may need varying degrees of support to be able to successfully navigate the school environment. So, when we have a student who may be struggling behaviorally or academically, whatever it may be, the Four Tasks can help us in terms of being a lens to look at that student, or even a group of students, to say, "What do we need to do right now to help them?"

Even if it's a classroom, we can take a group of students and see that maybe we've had in our school community, we've had an accident that has left some students injured, or worse, and we have a group of teens who are exhibiting a lot of emotion that day. Well, we go back to the tasks and we think. Are they feeling safe right now? They're not feeling safe. Then how do we adjust that first, knowing that we're not going to be able to teach them until we can help them feel safe?

Maybe that means we have an extra class meeting that morning. We talk with those teens about what happened, and we answer their questions and we help them understand what we can do as a community to rebuild safety for everyone together. We can also look at how we can feel more connected and rely on one another in healthy ways for that emotion support piece.
It can also look like, for instance, if younger students are coming in from recess and there's a lot of ruckus going on and the students seem dysregulated, it can be about how do we take a moment in this classroom to help everyone regulate? To help everyone ... Maybe they need to talk a little bit about what happened at recess. Maybe we need to support one another in that. Maybe we need to set some limits about some of the behavior about that might have happened in a very empathic way, and make a plan for how we're going to move forward together as a community so that everyone is feeling safe, connected, and able to be regulated.

Once that's addressed and taken care of, the group can move on and learn, but if you don't address those safety needs, those connection needs, and those regulations, just moving into an academic lesson is going to not work very well because students aren't in a physiological place in their brain to be able to be able to use the upstairs part of their brains to learn.

**Julie:** And that's true for all the kids in the classroom whether they've had some extreme trauma exposure or not, that transition, what you're talking about in terms or regulating in transition. Some are better at that than others, right?

**Jen:** That's exactly right. That's exactly right. And that's another example of how what's good for traumatized kids is good for all kids. It's really about, when we're looking at the entirety of our school population, it's about building in regulation within the day.

For instance, I was in a classroom just today and I was teaching a prevention lesson, social-emotional lesson, and the students came from gym class to back in the classroom. They were revved up.

**Julie:** Sure.

**Jen:** They were excited. They'd had a lot of fun and they needed a drink, so they each got a drink before they came into the room, but I needed to do something that was helping them regulate and helping them transition so they were ready for our lesson.

It can be simple things. One of the things I do with kids, it's kind of hard to explain on audio, but I do kind of a miming activity that just takes 20 seconds where I take some belly-breaths, and I've taught my students how to do that so when they see me do a belly-breath, or I say, "Let's smell the soup, and let's blow on the soup," they all do that with me. We've practiced it many, many times, so they know what to do, and have that
procedural memory within their bodies, that muscle memory/body memory to be able to do that with me.

Then, I will do this miming activity where I will pretend I’m a mime and I’ll just do some slow movements with my hands. Students know that when I do that, we’re quiet, and they follow me and they do the same thing I’m doing. I help regulate the entire room through that activity. Similar things can be done with music, or with brain breaks, or with yoga poses, or other mindfulness techniques that are good for all kids.

**Julie:** That’s awesome. That’s awesome.

So, what happens, because as you said earlier, one in four of the kids in every classroom has significant enough trauma that it’s impacting their learning. Out of your classroom that you were talking about being in just today, there were probably at least three or four kiddos, right, that have some pretty significant trauma.

What happens when they need something that’s a deeper intervention? What does that look like?

**Jen:** I’m so glad that you brought that up because we do need to be looking at these trauma-sensitive approaches in terms of layers. That’s how I look at it. So, multi-tiered systems of support.

We need to do prevention activities for all kids, but then students who have been traumatized, particularly those who may have been more severely traumatized, may need more support than what can be provided through that core instruction or what’s happening within the general education classroom.

There are so many different things we can do to help students who may need more support. Again, the Four Tasks, I believe, are what can help us provide a framework around our plan or program that we might put in place for those students, whether it’s a general education program or supports that we build into the general education classroom, supports that we build in through general education access to counseling within the school, all the way up to things that we might do as part of a 504 plan or part of an Individualized Educational Program for a student who may be entitled to special education.

The Four Tasks can drive and help us think about how to meet the needs of these traumatized kids. So, first we start with safety. If we have a student who may be struggling with behavior problems and we’re not sure how to help them, let’s start with that first question, whether it’s in a way of trying to be proactive, or even looking at a particular moment in time, we ask ourselves, "Is this student feeling safe right now?"
If not, then, "What do we need to do to help that kiddo feel safe?" Does that mean we need to help their world a little bit smaller? Does that mean we need to provide access, or even scheduled access, to preferred adults within the building who help them feel safe?

For some students, for instance, who may have been exposed to trauma and have been traumatized, recess can sometimes be a difficult time for them because it's hard to regulate their emotions and their arousal level when they're outside. So, we might have a kiddo who is, day after day, showing aggressive tendencies on the playground. Well, a typical kind of school response across the nation is to have that child come into the office and maybe miss the next recess. There's a consequence for that behavior.

**Jen:** But what we can see with our traumatized students is that you can consequence them today, you can take away recess again tomorrow, you can take recess away for the next year, but that doesn't necessarily ever help that child ever be successful at recess. So, we really need to flip the lens a little bit and use those tasks to help them.

I think about what we can do to build safety for this child at recess, and that might mean that this particular kiddo, for at least a period of time, has a small group recess where they have closer access to an adult. Maybe they have fewer recess choices so that we're setting them up for success, and by having an adult close by, they're coached on how to handle situations that might otherwise be too dysregulating for them. Because what we know about traumatized kids, and I believe what we know about all kids, actually, is they learn more from success than they learn from failure.

**Jen:** Yes. Don't we all? Don't we all? We learn more from success than we do from failure because we can build on success. We can remember that, and build on it, and do it again, and have the confidence to know that we can do it again.

Then we move onto the next task. So, perhaps a student is feeling safe but they're still struggling, whether it's in this moment in time or in general, as you start to look at patterns of behavior. One example that I share in my book, and I talked about at our trainings, is about Charlie. So, Charlie is a student, who is fictional by the way, who has
experienced trauma, different kinds of trauma, and because of that is very hypervigilant, hypersensitive to feeling rejected.

What might happen with Charlie is Charlie comes in from recess, multiple times, and makes it through recess okay but math starts up soon after. Teacher’s giving directions for math and all of a sudden Charlie’s papers are on the floor, maybe Charlie’s chair is tipped over, and Charlie is saying, "I'm not doing it! You're not going to make me!" We have this behavioral escalation happening because Charlie is dysregulated.

Over time, with talking with Charlie, getting to know Charlie better, understanding what's happening with Charlie, we might learn that what's really the foundation of the behavior that we're seeing is that Charlie experienced a typical kind of peer interaction at recess, a conflict, that left him feeling rejected. He may make it through recess, kind of holding it together, but by the time he manages the line coming in and his feelings are building and building, and growing bigger and bigger, and you sit down at his desk, he’s reached the end of his window of tolerance, if you will, for being able to handle the big emotions that are coming up inside.

When the teacher hands Charlie that math paper to do, or that math assignment, that's requiring heavy-duty upstairs brain activity, and because Charlie is using so much of his energy to regulate the emotions that he feels from that rejection, it's too much for him.

What really need to do is understand where that behavior is coming from. Not just focus on, "How do we consequence Charlie?" or, "How do you make sure Charlie doesn't get out of the math assignment no matter what?" or, "How do you reward Charlie?"

Rather, the question becomes, "How do you understand how not feeling safe or not feeling connected or not being regulated may be impacting Charlie's behavior?" Then, we can put a plan in place that helps build that safety, that connection, and that regulation for him so he can have the ability to be able to learn.

**Julie:** I think that's a huge, important point for teachers, and as I was listening to you talk through the story of Charlie, I thought that it also explained another thing that frequently happens with kids of trauma, in that they don't consistently blow up.

Charlie probably isn't dysregulating every time math class happens, it just happened because what had happened prior caused him to flip out about this math. So, that's even more confusing because the teacher's thinking, "Well, Charlie actually likes math," or does well in math, or has never done this before type thing.

**Jen:** Right, and I think we can all slip into that mindset sometimes, especially if we don't have training about trauma as educators, because it's something I used to say
myself, even, and I've heard other colleagues say it. Or, "Charlie can do it one day, Charlie can do it another day," and it's, "Charlie's choosing not to."

**Julie:** Mm-hmm.

**Jen:** We really have to be careful of that paradigm and careful of that language because just because Charlie is able to do it one day doesn't mean that Charlie has that safety, connection, and regulation to be able to do it on a different day when the circumstances may be different.

**Julie:** Right, and I think that that's at the crux of understanding a lot of the kids of trauma, is that at times they are able to hold it together. I know that I've heard other people explain it like a bucket analogy - their bucket is not full of whatever those stressors are and so it doesn't have to overflow. Then, on other days, or in other situations ... And that's hard. That causes us, as educators, to have to shift what we're thinking for sure.

**Jen:** Right, and so it becomes less about, "When I see this behavior, here's what I do," and more about, "How can I be in this place of showing the child or teen that no matter what I care about them, I'm here for them? When I see behavior and any other signs that the child is struggling, my first inclination is going to be to connect with the child, to connect and say, 'Hey, kiddo. What's going on? Help me understand here.'"

Now, that doesn't mean the classroom teacher can always be the person to do that. They have a room full of youth that they need to be tending to. It may mean that we're tapping into other supports within the school, whether it's the counselor or paraprofessional.

I kid you not, some of the most trauma-sensitive professionals I've encountered are in the classroom, but they're also in the office, in the cafeteria, in the hallway. It can be anybody in the school. It needs to be everybody in the school who can respond to kids in trauma-sensitive ways.

One of my favorite examples to share is ... You know, one of the things that can happen in a school, especially with traumatized students is, we can have those kids who are chronically late. Especially with young children, that's certainly not their fault, nor their responsibility to get themselves to school on time, but understandably, when you have students who are chronically late, in whatever school that might be, that can be frustrating for the secretarial staff.
When a child repeatedly comes in, or a sibling repeatedly comes in and they're late, and the lunch count has already been turned in, and the phone's ringing, and there's so much going on, it would be really easy for any secretary in that situation to kind of sigh and say, "You're late again. How many times do I have to tell you, it's so important to get to school on time?"

A trauma-sensitive staff member is going to understand that there may have been many circumstances that led to that tardiness today and goodness knows what that child may have experienced the morning or the night before, and greets that child with a smile that's genuine and says, "Hey, kiddo. I'm glad you're here. Have you had breakfast this morning? If not, you know what? I've got a little basket here. I've got a granola bar, I've got some cereal, I've got some bananas. What sounds good to you?"

From there, the child who may be coming from a very stressful situation - we don't know and we may never know - but that child's first experience walking in the door, and the experience they can count on every single day is, "There are people here who care about me, who are going to connect with me. They care and they're here for me."

Some of the best things that can happen, once that connection is made, is, you know, that little one's eyes might tear up a little bit because they're experiencing a little bit of safety and security. A trauma-sensitive secretary, at that point, is going to call me, the school counselor or whoever the school counselor may be, and say, "You know, so-and-so is here, but I just have a sense that something's up. Can you meet him in the hallway and just connect before they head to the classroom?"

That can make all the difference in that child's day and that child's life, to have adults who just open their arms to them and say, "We're here for you. How can we help?"

**Julie:** Mm-hmm. That really is at the heart of why all of the people who are working in the school, school staff and educators, too - it's why they're there, because of that love and concern for the kids, but it also takes... Not only does it take training and forethought and understanding that you should do this, but it takes a lot of emotional energy and a lot of energy to do this work. So, what do you have to say about the educators and their need for care as well?

**Jen:** That is so important. We have to work together to not just build hope for students but build hope for educators and helping educators feel safe at school, helping educators feel connected and supported, helping educators to better understand their own stress-response systems, their own triggers, because we all have them. Every single one of us.

And boy, if we really want to work on ourselves, traumatized students can help us find buttons in ourselves that we didn't even know we had, sometimes. The reason for that is
because they are reenacting some of the patterns and relationships that they've experienced before, and that means that sometimes, whether they realize it or not, they may be trying to push us away. In doing that, they are testing us to see, are we going to be safe? Are we going to stay connect with them? Are we going to stay regulated when we are frustrated with them, when they are not partaking in actions that are helping the school community? Are we going to be the people that they can trust to build a healthy relationship with?

In helping educators become more trauma-sensitive, we're helping them understand those patterns and we're doing it in a way that helps them understand themselves - what their own triggers might be, what they may need to build into their self-care plans, and what we need to do for each other to help support one another as we do this important work because it is difficult. It is emotionally exhausting. There isn't a quick fix. If there was, we would have landed on it by now.

That doesn't mean that there isn't hope. If we can take care of one another, help each other learn what does work with traumatized students and why it works, then we can work together as a team to help these kids. It may mean that we create the level of safety where a teacher can walk into my office as a counselor and say, "You know what? I'm reaching a point today where I am struggling. I am struggling to stay regulated."

And I can say to that teacher, "I get it. There's no shame in that." There's no me pointing the finger or judging them in that. It's, "What can I do to help? How can we work together? How can we give you a break? How can we help support you and your students?" Because we're really in this together, all of us.

**Julie:** Mm-hmm. Yeah. That's awesome. That's what makes the school, the trauma-sensitive - just thinking about the sensitive part of that is that you're sensitive to the needs of everybody in the school. Not just the students but realizing that the adults also have an emotional brain, also have the ability to have their emotions triggered, which circles back around to really making this all about relationships and all about doing what you can to really connect and build relationships with the kids.

You gave a great example about the school secretary. Can you just talk a little bit more about the importance of focusing on those relationships?

**Jen:** Yes, and I think that this is something that, as we help all educators - all teachers, administrators, support staff, paraprofessionals - better understand the needs of traumatized youth, it's so important that we help them understand the different that we can make. The research is showing us over and over again that one healthy, positive relationship - just one - is enough to help a traumatized student grow up and have a healthy relationship with their own children down the line, later.
One relationship. That's huge. That's a teacher. That's a coach. That's a music director. That's a paraprofessional in the library. That's a custodian in the hallway who takes those extra steps to build relationships with kids. We can, as educators - and I've seen this happen ... As we begin to better understand trauma and how it impacts kids, we start to kids in a different way.

I think one step along the process is to become overwhelmed by the needs of youth and overwhelmed by the stories. We definitely need to be aware of that and take care of ourselves, but I think a huge piece of being able to do that is recognizing that what we do makes an incredible difference. If we sit down and talk with adults who experienced trauma in their youth who are experiencing success today, every single one of them will say, "It's because so-and-so was in my life. They were there for me. They made a difference in my life, and that's what helped me become who I am today."

We have to help educators remember that. We have to remind them of that, because in the world of trauma it's steps forward, steps back, forward, steps back, and sometimes the shoes are taken off by these kiddos and they're throwing them across the room. We have to hold onto that experience and that belief and that conviction that what we do does make a difference. We can't forget that.

Julie: Well, thank you, Jen. That's powerful words to end on. For the listeners who don't realize this, Jen walks the walk daily in her school and does a wonderful job of supporting her educators and promoting the idea of trauma-informed and trauma-sensitive school systems and school care.

With your permission, Jen, I would love for us to attach on the page that this interview is going to be, a link to what your school system did with a brain unit that is just - not only is it absolutely precious and darling, but it's really a great example of how you can teach child self-regulation in a structured school way of doing that that really sticks with them. It's okay that we do that, right?

Jen: Yes, you're very welcome to do that. Our third graders, a couple of years ago, worked very hard together to write all the pieces of that mindfulness video and we had a lot of fun doing it together, too. I'm very, very proud of our kids and I think it just goes to show that ... Boy, if second and third graders can understand how their brain works, then, my goodness, we, as educators, can certainly do it, too.

What a powerful movement it is when we do this together and collectively, and work together not just as one group of educators, but as a school, as a district, as a state, as a country. We're going to move mountains together, so I just really look forward to having more educators across the country joining us in this important work, and let's get to it.
Julie: Awesome. Well, thank you. Thanks for your time today. Thanks for all that you're doing at your school in Iowa and throughout the state and as well as all the work that you're doing with us at the Attachment & Trauma Network as our lead trainer in working with several school districts to become trauma-sensitive.

You're right - let's do it. You're out there leading the cause and I really appreciate it.

Jen: Well, thanks so much, Julie. I enjoy it very much, and we have many good things to come. Thank you.

Julie: Yes. Yes.

Okay, folks, this is Julie Beem, and I want to thank you for joining us today. I've been talking with Jen Alexander about, why trauma-sensitive schools and why it's an important movement.

This is an interview with the Educating Traumatized Children Summit. It is one of 18 interviews that's part of this summit. If you've missed any of these interviews or would like a complete set all the recordtings from the summit, or a set of the recordtings with transcripts, you can visit our website at www.creatingtraumasensitiveschools.org.

At the Attachment & Trauma Network, we're committed to helping traumatized children, their families, their schools, and their communities. If you'd like to learn more about the support, education, and advocacy we provide, you can find all kinds of information at our main site, and that is www.attachtrauma.org.

Thank you so much for tuning in today, and please join us again for our other interviews.

Links:

https://msjenalexander.com/2016/02/14/if-not-a-sticker-chart-then-what/


https://attachu.org/product/trauma-sensitive-educator-cards/

ATN sites:

http://creatingtraumasensitiveschools.org/

http://www.attachmenttraumanetwork.org/