

~~What's Wrong With You?~~ versus **What Happened to You?**

For too long, many systems—especially those serving children and families—have operated under a “What’s wrong with you?” mindset. This approach focuses on behavior as a problem to fix, relying on punishment or rewards to motivate change. But there’s a better, more compassionate way.

What’s wrong with you?

This traditional lens views challenging behavior as something to eliminate, often without asking why it's happening in the first place.

Focuses only on changing negative behavior

The goal is compliance, with little room for understanding or connection.

Change is driven by punishment or reward

Interventions rely on external motivators like sticker charts or consequences, rather than skill-building.

The treater is the expert

Professionals are seen as the ones with all the answers. Children and families are passive recipients of solutions.

Strong emotions from helpers are seen as weakness

When educators or providers feel overwhelmed by the work, it may be viewed as unprofessional or a sign of burnout.

***This mindset can deepen shame, disconnection, and misunderstanding
for both children and those who care for them.***

What Happened to You?

A trauma-informed approach shifts the question. Instead of asking *what’s wrong with you*, we ask *what happened to you?* This small change makes a big difference.

Views behavior as adaptive

All behavior has meaning. Even difficult behaviors are often ways of coping or communicating unmet needs.

Change is built through relationships

Healing and learning happen in connection with others. Trust, consistency, and co-regulation are essential.

The treater is a collaborator


Children and families are seen as partners in the process. Their voices, experiences, and strengths are valued.

Strong emotions from helpers are normal

Working with trauma affects us. Acknowledging vicarious trauma is part of being a reflective, healthy practitioner—not a weakness.

Changing the Question Changes Everything

By shifting from “What’s wrong with you?” to “What happened to you?”, we build systems of care that are more compassionate, more effective, and more human. At the heart of this shift is the belief that everyone—no matter their story—has the capacity to heal and grow when met with curiosity, respect, and connection.



~~What's Wrong With You?~~ versus What Happened to You? in the Classroom:

<i>Non-Trauma-Informed Classroom</i>	<i>Trauma-Informed Classroom</i>
Four-year-old Mike struggles to sit still during circle time and often talks out of turn. The teacher sees this as disruptive behavior and repeatedly removes him from the group.	Four-year-old Mike struggles during circle time. Ms. Ramirez notices this and uses calm reminders and visual cues to help him transition more smoothly.
Staff label Mike a “problem child” and warn each other about his behavior. No efforts are made to understand what might be driving his actions.	Ms. Ramirez sees Mike’s behavior as communication. She checks in with him, offers breaks, and works to understand what he’s experiencing emotionally.
Communication with Mike’s mom focuses on his noncompliance and need for outside help. His home life is not explored or considered.	Ms. Ramirez builds a relationship with Mike’s family and partners with the school counselor to create a support plan. Home dynamics are respectfully considered.
Staff expect Mike to adapt or be removed. When he doesn’t improve quickly, they lose patience and hope.	Ms. Ramirez believes every day is a new opportunity. She celebrates small steps and uses strengths-based strategies to help Mike build confidence and regulation skills.
There’s little support for the educator; stress builds and relationships suffer.	Ms. Ramirez meets regularly with a colleague to reflect, process challenges, and sustain her ability to show up well for her students.