

Our Values and Frameworks

The Illinois Safe Schools Alliance envisions a world in which youth develop to their fullest potential, learning in safe and nurturing schools, living in communities that accept and honor differences, where everyone has the freedom to express their sexual orientation and gender identity. We are guided by core values and frameworks that inform the choices we make both about *what* work we do as well as *how* we do our work toward this vision. We are committed to anti-oppression and to non-punitive approaches to harm and conflict, and we aspire to be trauma-informed and body positive. These values and frameworks guide our youth programs, advocacy, professional learning, and fundraising as well as our interpersonal dynamics as youth leaders, staff, volunteers, and board members.

Anti-Oppression

The Alliance believes that oppression exists in our society and that oppression limits individual access to personal, institutional, and societal power by one group at the expense of others. *Anti-oppression* is both a value and a framework that acknowledges power and privilege and how they play out in the form of access to decision making and in access to physical and emotional safety. We know oppression can manifest in individual interactions through hateful words and micro-aggressions, and in the way institutions and systems are designed. Oppression can impact the way we feel about ourselves, which can lead to an internalization of the systems that harm us. Through working with a commitment to anti-oppression, we acknowledge that whether we want it to or not, these problems are bigger than any one of us. Thus, we need to actively work against the day to day ways oppression plays out while also working long term to change the systems that rely on oppression.

Since oppression and power are closely connected, we strive to listen to and empower folks who, due to oppression, don't often have the power to make choices that folks with privilege have. For example, to counteract adultism (which is a system of oppression that privileges adults over young folks) we aim to support young folks' access to making decisions, to take the time to explain expectations, and to listen to what young folks say they need and respect it even if, as adults, we don't understand. In an anti-oppression framework, power is not inherently a bad thing, but instead something that creates opportunity, autonomy, and safety. Power *is* a bad thing when it is used to restrict other people's access.

Non-Punitive

The Alliance believes that none of us are disposable and that each of us is a valuable member of the communities we share. Non-punitive models strive to address harm without causing harm. Instead of using traditional models of punishment, we create opportunities to be clear about expectations and boundaries for how we engage in work up front and, when those expectations aren't met, we'll try to find out why and convey the impact that had on others. Most of us are pretty used to traditional models of punishment where we are supposed to be "taught a lesson" when we do something we weren't supposed to do. Punishment is supposed to warn us of what we'll lose if we do that thing again or to show us that someone else has more power or is better than us. Punitive models are used in many parts of our lives: school, healthcare, in the criminal legal system, and even in our family and personal relationships.

We see a couple of big problems with traditional punishment models. First, they use tools of oppression (like shame, isolation, "quick fixes" and taking away someone's power) to address problems. Second, traditional punishment models miss opportunities to clarify expectations and to find out why those expectations weren't met. Third, we think these traditional models of punishment often make it seem like problems are caused only by individuals and not created by the larger systems of oppression we're working against (like homophobia!) Finally, even in situations of violence or harm toward another person, traditional punishment approaches usually harm people in the process, often lead to the harm getting worse later and generally don't succeed in preventing the harm from occurring or bring healing for the folks who experienced harm.

Many of us are so used to the punitive approaches that surround us that we think a non-punitive approach simply means we don't do *anything* when expectations and boundaries aren't respected. In fact, non-punitive approaches often means doing a lot *more* than traditional punishment models: spending more time asking questions, listening, learning, and supporting healing and then trying to shift the root causes of the issue. With non-punitive approaches, we still set boundaries but we just respond differently when those boundaries are broken such as by having conversations, engaging in a process such as a circle, or other types of restorative practices.

Trauma-Informed

The Alliance believes that most people experience trauma and that experiencing systemic oppression is a form of trauma. Trauma has many definitions and is a word used in healthcare, wellness and healing practices, youth work, and social services. Personal trauma can occur when someone experiences or witnesses violence. Violence takes many forms – it can be



physical, mental, sexual, emotional, and spiritual. It can also occur in the form of neglect of our basic needs or it can be structural like our healthcare providers denying us care we need because of our race, body size, or our gender identity. Sometimes violence also comes in the form of limiting our access to money which restricts our decision making and autonomy and can make it impossible for us to take care of ourselves in the way we need when other types of violence occur.

Sometimes when we talk about trauma, we also talk about “triggers.” A trigger is something that causes a person to recall an experience of violence. Because the trigger isn’t *actually* the experience of violence, it can be surprising to others who haven’t experienced the root trauma. For example, for someone who experienced violence in a specific hallway in school, going down that hallway could be triggering even though the hallway *itself* didn’t cause the harm. A trigger can also occur when something someone needs to feel safe is taken away. For example, for someone who needs to see who is in a room with them to feel safe, being told that they must sit in the front of a classroom where their back will be to all of their classmates could be triggering for that person.

By aspiring to be trauma-informed, we create spaces designed with the assumption that most people hold trauma and the desire to minimize the impact of that trauma as much as possible. Instead of assuming people don’t have trauma and only addressing trauma when someone is triggered, we are thoughtful about how to reduce possible triggers in advance. This happens in different ways such as by asking people what they need instead of assuming, by offering options as much as possible, and by sharing information with individuals so they can make decisions about whether and how they will participate based upon their own needs. It also means explaining the reason behind boundaries, rules, and expectations of each other so people understand *why* there is a rule.

We also recognize that for oppressed people, “safe” spaces don’t usually exist, so instead we attempt to minimize harm by creating *safer* spaces through pushing ourselves to confront the ways we use and shift power.

With a trauma-informed approach, we also understand that oppression by its very definition means not having power. Powerlessness can make us sad, feel alone, and can make us angry. Punitive approaches that respond to anger or self-isolation with punishment often aggravate the feeling of powerlessness, rejection, and shame. With this understanding, we help clarify that non-punitive approaches to addressing the ways trauma manifests in our bodies and our minds can be (and is!) part of a trauma-informed framework.



Body Positive

The Alliance believes that all bodies are valid. We believe that self-determination of gender expression is limitless and is not tied to having a certain kind of body. We actively resist policing how people express their gender. So often in dominant culture we receive messages that certain clothing is appropriate for certain bodies, and those are often thin, cisgender, white, able-bodied people. The presence or absence of anatomy often limits what are deemed “appropriate” clothing for individuals as well. We are working to create an environment where all people; fat and thin, cisgender, transgender, and genderqueer, disabled and able bodied, Black, brown and white, can express themselves in ways that align with how they feel beautiful, visible, and authentic. It is important to note the being body positive does not mean that we have to comment or compliment each other’s body or form of expression.

