



RESILIENT OAKLAND COMMUNITIES AND KIDS (ROCK) TOOLKIT:

LESSONS IN
HEALING-CENTERED,
TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE
EARLY EDUCATION



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A healing-centered approach views trauma not simply as an individual isolated experience, but rather highlights the ways in which trauma and healing are experienced collectively. - Shawn Ginwright

””

Early childhood is the best time to build a foundation for lifelong health and happiness. A growing body of evidence shows that trauma can disrupt that foundation – interfering with brain development and negatively impacting later quality of life. Research also shows that in California, 64% of adults have experienced at least one serious childhood trauma by the age of 18.

INTRODUCTION

Since 2017, Oakland Starting Smart and Strong (OSSS) has been working with early learning educators through the Resilient Oakland Communities and Kids (ROCK) initiative to **increase resilience and healing and to promote the healthy social emotional development of children in trauma-sensitive and trauma-responsive environments**. We build knowledge about protective factors and resilience, trauma and its impact on children's health and learning, and classroom-based practices for early childhood educators. ROCK also supports self-awareness in adults around their own experiences with trauma and self-care strategies that they can use to support their well-being.

The work of ROCK supports trauma-sensitive and trauma-responsive learning environments so early learning educators can build resilience and nurture healthy social emotional development for the children in their care.

Crucially, educators are more able to offer a healing early learning environment when they are attuned to their own well-being.



Several years in, it's clear that ROCK has had a positive impact. OUSD early childhood educators who completed a survey in 2022 reported widespread use of many trauma-responsive classroom strategies. Those who participated in a ROCK Professional Learning Community (PLC) held more positive beliefs about their students, jobs and themselves compared to those who did not attend a PLC.

In these pages we offer highlights about ROCK, including feedback from educators, lessons learned and practical ideas for implementation. We also link to a wide range of tools that ROCK partners have created and utilized. We hope this information will serve as

inspiration and spark new ideas for early learning educators and administrators, both within Oakland and in other communities, who want to use some of these strategies in their own classrooms, school districts and programs.



What is trauma?

According to one definition, “trauma is an actual or perceived danger that undermines a child’s sense of physical or emotional safety, or poses a threat to the safety of the child’s parents or caregivers, overwhelming their coping ability, and affecting their functioning and development” (Nicholson, Perez, and Kurtz). Trauma can be experienced by children both directly and indirectly and can be one isolated event and/or an occurrence over time.

“ —
I didn't know a lot about trauma before ROCK. I've taken many classes now. Trauma exists in all of us, in little moments of time. One time there was an airplane flying low over our playground. If a person comes from a country with war, this might trigger something in a child or teacher. ROCK helped me to say trauma exists, it's not something to judge. But you can talk about it.” - Mari, OUSD Preschool Teacher

“
| *Behavior is the language of trauma. Children will show you before they tell you that they are in distress. - Micere Keels*

What are Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)?

ACEs are traumatic factors or events that could have lasting effects on young children's development. These factors include the following:

- Abuse (physical, sexual, emotional)
- Neglect (physical, emotional)
- Domestic violence
- Household substance abuse
- Household mental illness
- Experiencing homelessness
- Being an immigrant
- Involvement with foster care system
- Incarcerated household member
- Parental separation or divorce
- Racism
- Witnessing violence outside the home
- Bullying
- Losing a parent to deportation
- Living in an unsafe neighborhood
- Attending a school that enforces a zero-tolerance discipline policy

The more ACEs a child experiences, the more they are at risk for various delays. According to the [ACES Aware website](#), the associated toxic stress ACEs create are the root causes of some of the most common, serious, and costly health and social challenges facing our communities.

In California, 64% of adults reported having at least one ACE by the age of 18. Sixteen percent reported having 4 or more ACEs before the age of 18.

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| *If you never address your own traumas, you never learn to have strategies to help yourself/self care”*
- Head Start PLC Participant



BACKGROUND & STRUCTURE

OSSS is a citywide collaborative that advances racial justice, develops and amplifies community-driven solutions, and advocates for changes in policy and resources to create an early childhood ecosystem that effectively serves children 0-5, their families, caregivers, and educators.

As part of the Packard Foundation’s Starting Smart and Strong Initiative, OSSS was asked to identify a ‘testing and learning’ focus for Oakland that would inform teaching in formal early childhood education settings, and eventually be scaled to impact the broader early learning ecosystem. At the same time, early childhood teachers and administrators in Oakland began identifying the need for classroom practices that could address trauma. ROCK was initiated out of this call to action.

ROCK was created and strengthened by many partners, including but not limited to early childhood educators and administrators, coaches, mental health consultants, content experts, yoga and mindfulness teachers, Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), City of Oakland Head Start, and OSSS staff. All of these individuals and agencies have provided critical expertise, knowledge, and cultural assets. See [Page 18](#) for a comprehensive list of collaborative partners.

This collaborative worked together to develop a programmatic framework, create tools and test specific strategies that would move us towards our goal of increasing resilience and healing for young children. Since 2017, we have crafted and honed a teacher coaching framework that includes in-person and virtual group workshops, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), educator coaching, yoga and self-care resources.



The project was initially called “OTIP: Oakland Trauma Informed Practices.” Collaborative members determined that the ultimate aim of OTIP was to increase the resilience and healthy social emotional development of children in trauma-sensitive and trauma-responsive healing environments. OTIP was renamed ROCK: Resilient Oakland Communities and Kids, to ensure that the project’s name reflected our strength-based framework and values.

EDUCATOR REFLECTION

*The following excerpt is from an interview with Caroline Jones, OUSD Early Learning Principal, who has been engaging with ROCK for several years. She shares how ROCK has informed her practice.**



I first got involved with ROCK before it was called ROCK. We were basing it in trauma, as though it were something that happened *at* kids. Then we realized we needed to understand our own trauma history to learn more about how we show up and interact with families.

We moved to self-introspection. Who are we, what do we think about child rearing? What happened to us, and how does this present when we're interacting with families?

For instance, my mother is a Chinese immigrant, and culturally it was very hard for me to praise children. It felt shameful. We talked about this with each other: where do you feel it in your body; what does it make you think of? We had a mental health consultant who was part of these meetings and helped us unpack our own experiences.

Early childhood is this very special place. We're potty-training kids; we're teaching them to feed themselves. It's very intimate. Through ROCK, we talked about our experiences as children and caretaking our own children or other family members. It really needs to be teased apart. How do you make sure you're doing right by the kids and you're not slipping into this version of yourself that was the child, or was the parent?

ROCK allows us to have a common language with our colleagues and be able to say things like "I'm not sure how I'm entering this situation but I know that I'm tired and I need to step out."

Now, we don't immediately shy away from trauma that families are experiencing. If a mom comes in and says "I just got kids back from the foster system" – if we don't know what to do, we at least know how to provide resources.

Sometimes when you're in high need areas, you want to keep everything else out, and that can include the families. Instead of feeling like, "that feels chaotic, keep it away from me," ROCK has helped us to go deeper in our relationships with families experiencing high levels of stress.

Ultimately, ROCK is about establishing the belief in yourself and in all the families you interact with that everyone is highly capable and can engage in tremendous learning. That leads to self-care. That leads to the belief that all kids are capable of learning. And the belief that families love their kids and want the best for their kids.



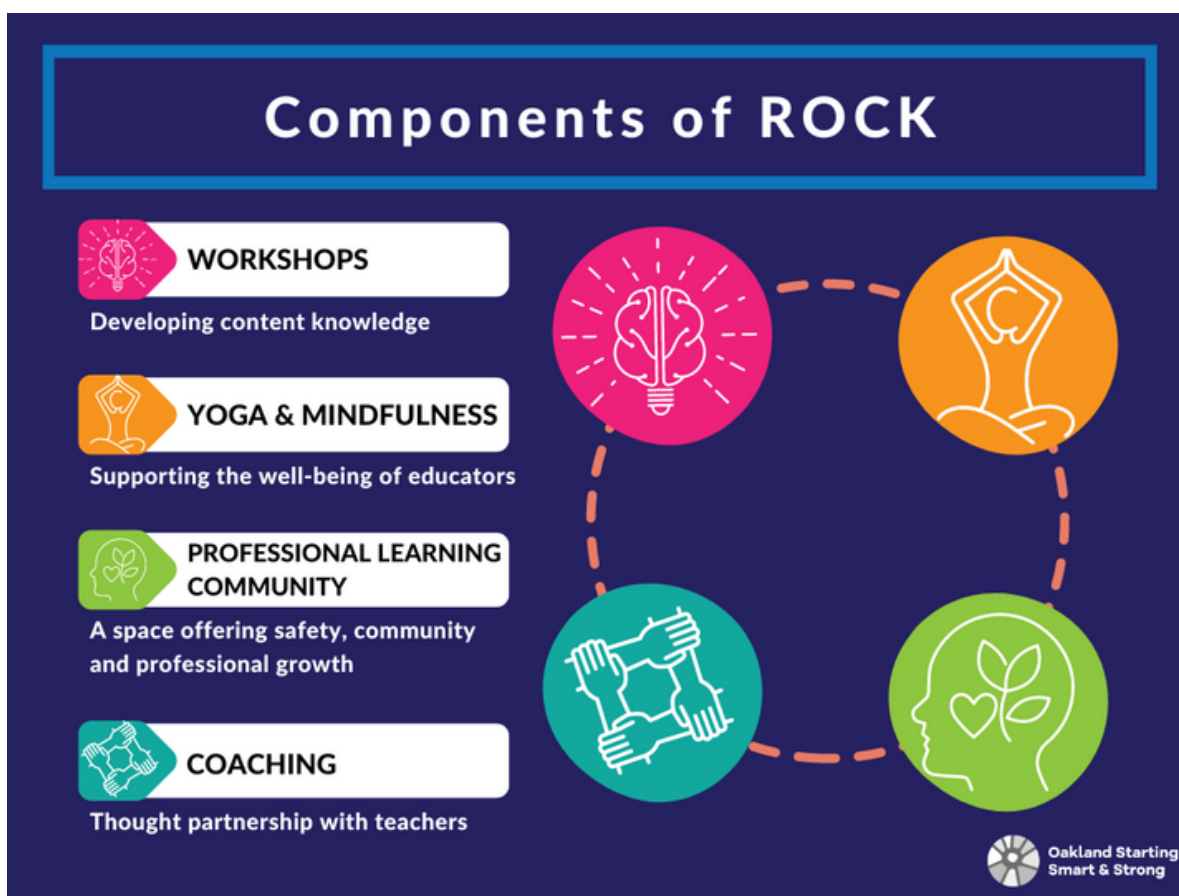
**This interview was edited for clarity and brevity.*

COMPONENTS OF ROCK

ROCK's design relies upon several best practices documented in the research on adult learning. Adult learning principles include:

- Learner-driven process where adults are supported to have control and agency
- Self-reflection that connects personal and professional lived experiences
- Peer learning and collaboration in which interactions with colleagues are encouraged
- Introspection and examination of personal assumptions, values, and beliefs
- Awareness of the role of emotions in learning, attention, and memory
- High quality digital learning experiences that are interactive and responsive

The components of ROCK have varied over the years and have included several types of support for early childhood educators, including in-person and virtual workshops, yoga and mindfulness, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and educator coaching.



“*The ROCK professional learning community has helped me attune to myself emotionally as well as to the children’s needs and feelings, and to better understand them and think of positive ways to address their trauma.*” – PLC participant

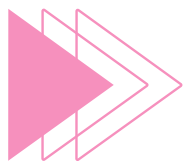
COMPONENTS OF ROCK

WORKSHOPS

Developing content knowledge

OSSS has offered a multitude of ROCK workshops for early childhood educators in Oakland, open to providers in different settings. Many of them follow evidence-based trauma-responsive practices for children, adults, and systems as organized in Trauma-Informed Practices for Early Childhood Educators (Nicholson et al, 2023). To meet the needs of educators, all professional development offerings have included tangible and practical strategies and tools provided by experienced facilitators. Topics have varied over the years and have included:

- Defining trauma
- Race, equity, and trauma
- Strengthening self-awareness to reduce burnout
- Going Deeper with Practical Classroom Strategies
- Effects of trauma on the brain
- Family engagement strategies that promote resilience
- Trauma-responsive leadership and supervision
- Promoting strategies for self-regulation



For a resource on high quality teachings, visit the [Center for Optimal Brain Integration \(COBI\) website](#). COBI offers a train-the-trainer institute for educators to become authorized in offering COBI modules.

YOGA AND MINDFULNESS

Supporting the well-being of educators

A fundamental component of the ROCK work is “Trauma-Informed Yoga for Educators,” a free series of classes offered to all early educators within OUSD. The classes are designed to focus on reducing stress and increasing overall well-being by exploring mind-body tools, including breathwork, body scan relaxation techniques, and movement exercises. OUSD advocated for the classes to be counted for professional development credit, highlighting the importance of self care and wellbeing for educators. The series has been offered at two different times a day to accommodate differing schedules of early educators. Sessions moved online during the pandemic, where they expanded to include children and family members. In person sessions have resumed.



Many educators began doing yoga with their students after participating in Happy and Healthy Yoga and have appreciated [Mindful Kids: 50 Mindfulness Activities for Kindness, Focus and Calm](#).

COMPONENTS OF ROCK

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (PLCS)

A space offering safety, community and professional growth

OSSS developed monthly ROCK facilitated peer learning sessions for early educators at OUSD and Oakland Head Start preschool sites. Principals, teachers, instructional assistants, coaches, and mental health support providers all participated in monthly PLCs during the school year. Dinner was served and stipends provided for those staying over their contract hours. Content for these sessions included self-care, defining the work of a resilience-building educator, identifying personal triggers, strategies for the classroom, and concentrating conversations on collaboratively supporting a single child.



Sample Professional Learning Community (PLC) scopes, agendas, and other tools can be found on [Page 15](#).



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“My work in Head Start, I've been there 22 years and it's never been easy... as far as the ROCK program, everything worked. You know, it takes a lot of courage to sit in a room of your peers, you don't know if you like each other, you don't want to know all that much about each other. But...it's like the medicine, it's the medicine we needed to take” - Head Start Preschool Teacher

COACHING

Thought partnership with teachers

In order to both validate and continually grow teaching practice, coaching has been a vital part of ROCK. Teachers set the pace for their individual coaching; coaches encourage them to identify and set their own focus points or goals. ROCK strategies are incorporated into coaching conversations, with topics including recognizing adult triggers; creating safe, nurturing environments and predictable schedules, and building autonomy in young children.



For background and information on coaching in early childhood settings, review [Effective Coaching in Early Childhood Care and Education](#), developed by First 5 Alameda County.

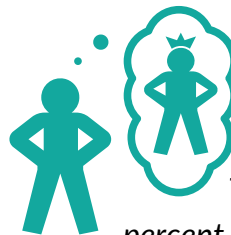
ASSESSMENT & IMPACT

In the years since ROCK was created and as it has evolved, teachers, administrators, mental health professionals and other participants have overwhelmingly reported that the program is beneficial for a range of reasons.

[A formal qualitative and quantitative evaluation of ROCK was conducted in 2020.](#) Key findings from this evaluation included:



Deficit views of children and their behavior are beginning to be disrupted. Teachers' thinking shifted away from "what's wrong with this kid" to "what's the context of the child?"



Teachers felt an increase in their general sense of self-efficacy in the long term. There was a 20% increase in the percent of teachers strongly agreeing that: "If I keep trying I can find a way to reach even the most challenging child."



Teachers felt an increased desire to stay in the early childhood teaching profession, despite a slight increase in feeling overwhelmed by their job.



An increased percentage of teachers showed confidence in using trauma responsive strategies when interacting with families.

“Teachers are beginning to think about their first reaction to their experience of a situation. And then to think about ways in which their responses are affecting the situation... how are their own experiences or their own triggers, or even their own biases, affecting how they're reacting to children's behaviors, challenging behaviors” - Early childhood administrator



ASSESSMENT & IMPACT

In the [2020 Data Placemat](#) developed by Engage R+D, external evaluators reported that coaching and ROCK activities had an impact on child outcomes in OUSD:



Children experienced steady, positive districtwide increase in Spring Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP) scores since 2016.

By the 2018-2019 school year, **78%** of OUSD ECE children were in classrooms where teachers were getting support from ROCK.



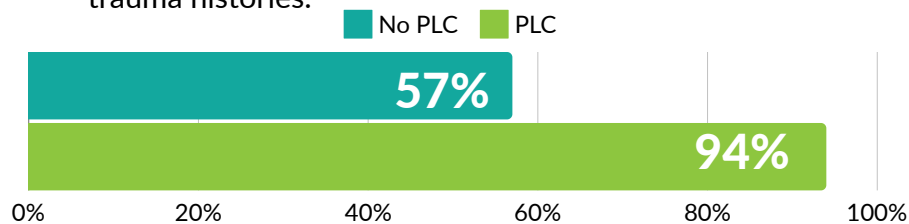
“I love how they're making us step back and [ask] what are your triggers or how can you identify your own self on the red, on the orange and the green [zones of self-awareness]? So that way I have an actual physical plan that I could use. This is something I could use in the classroom, something that is tangible, something that I could actually work with. I love the hands on activities and the examples. Or when we each share with each other, I was like, 'Oh this is working in my center'...having an open kind of conversation, not just having the person presenting to us. I love having the smaller group conversations... only when you have the smaller group you could actually let everyone talk, have everyone's voice be heard.” Janice, Head Start PLC Participant

ASSESSMENT & IMPACT

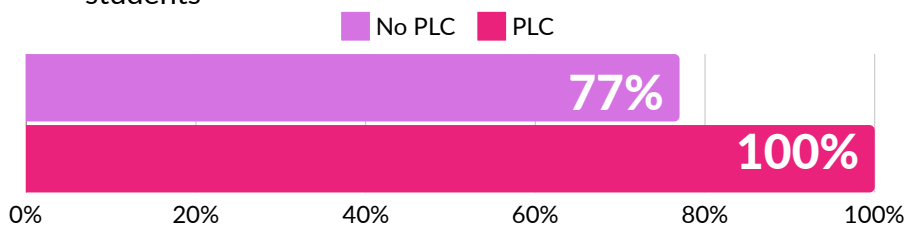
In 2022, an anonymous survey was conducted with all OUSD early childhood educators. [Findings from this survey included:](#)

Educators who participated in a ROCK Professional Learning Community (PLC) held more positive beliefs about their students, jobs, and themselves compared to those who did not attend a PLC.

+37% More believed that focusing on developing healthy, healing relationships is the best approach when working with people with trauma histories.



+23% More believed they felt able to do their best each day to help their students



Educators throughout OUSD Early Learning are using trauma-responsive strategies:

- 98%** identify and express sensations and feelings
- 88%** practice mindfulness with children
- 88%** created a quiet and safe space where children can be when distressed
- 86%** use eye-level proximity and tone of voice
- 79%** support self-initiated play

LESSONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Our collaborative work over the years with ROCK partners, including early childhood educators, has revealed many valuable lessons learned that inform recommendations for future implementation:

LESSONS

Teachers increased self-awareness of their own stress and trauma, and reported the use of pausing and reflection to disrupt reactivity in response to challenging behavior.

Yoga and mindfulness reduced educators' stress and pain.

Coupling workshops with coaching and/or PLCs is helpful for reflection, planning and practice.

Trauma and resilience are connected to systems of oppression and privilege.

Collaboration between the adults involved in a child's life and learning is essential.

Specific indicators can show the difference that ROCK is making.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Support teachers to connect ROCK concepts and content to themselves first, and to understand how their stress and trauma impacts their work. Focus on teachers' health and well-being.

Integrate mindfulness and a somatic approach (ie breathing, visualizations, grounding exercises) for educators and children.

Cultivate a structured and protected space that fosters open and meaningful dialogue among educators.

Integrate cultural responsiveness, anti-racist and anti-bias practices into all ROCK activities aiming for individual and organizational change.

Expand participation to a wide range of people in different roles and across the school community (e.g., instructional assistants, mental health consultants, administrators, parents/caregivers, etc.) to have access to ROCK content and strategies.

Identify and track metrics for evaluating ROCK's 'value add.'

TOOLS

The following are an offering of tools. Early childhood educators and program staff interested in engaging in trauma-responsive, resilient building work are encouraged to take a look at these tools, try them on, and modify them to fit their specific contexts. It is our hope that these tools serve as a springboard for more conversations about trauma-responsive practices and how to cultivate more safe, welcoming, resilient-building learning spaces for both educators and children.



TRAUMA RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

These tools serve as a launching pad. When using them, educators are invited to both celebrate the trauma-responsive strategies they are already engaging with and to also identify a few strategies they might try, or refine.

- Trauma-Responsive Classroom Strategies [English](#) / [Spanish](#)
- [ROCK Classroom Strategies](#): These slides offer the ROCK classroom strategies in slide format, with many examples. Facilitators are encouraged to use these slides to support having conversations with educators about what they are already doing in the classroom and what goals they can set.

TRIGGER CHECKLIST

In this work, educators, administrators, and other adults are frequently invited to engage in self-examination. We suggest that adults spend time considering each of these possible triggers and talk in teaching teams about support mechanisms.

- Trigger Assessment [English](#) / [Spanish](#)

KNOWING CHILDREN

In collaboration with [New Teacher Center](#), this tool relies on the notion that in order to deeply engage with a child, it is important to make efforts to see the full picture. The Knowing Children tool confirms that educators amazingly know so much about their children and also prompts them to find out more.

- [Knowing Children Tool](#)

TOOLS



PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY (PLC) TOOLS

School staff meet together regularly, building a safe learning community. The following encompass a sample launching toolkit for any school site interested in starting a PLC.

- [ROCK PLC Sample Scope](#): This scope offers guidance for facilitating a monthly, one-hour PLC. It includes meeting objectives and topics for a 7-month sequence
- [ROCK PLC Sample Agenda](#): This agenda offers a template for the flow and facilitation of a first PLC session. Ideally, all sessions include an opening to ground participants, relationship building activities, ROCK content (in this case, “The Why”), highlights of practice and self care discussions. Because this sample agenda is from the first session, time is spent co-constructing and discussing agreements.
- [ROCK PLC Sample Participant Packet](#): Participant pages and packets are offered throughout the PLC. These sheets are a simple, accessible resource for participants, as a support for the text, *Trauma Informed Practices for Early Childhood Educators* by Nicholson, Perez, Kurtz, Bryant, and Giles (2023).

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We used to have a lot more times when teachers would say they couldn’t handle a child’s behavior. Now, teachers more often say “I don’t really think it is a behavioral issue – I think the child is bored!” Teachers are holding it down and saying, “this is normal behavior and even if it’s not, how can I support the family?”

“The only thing I can think of that has changed is that they have ROCK in their back pocket. ROCK has empowered staff to say, “I understand that traumas are coming into this community. I can work with this in the classroom.” - Kianga, OUSD Early Learning Principal

COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE SERIES:

This 4-part online series invites educators to consider trauma-based practices and offering classroom strategies to support resilience. Educators are asked to identify a focus child to keep in mind throughout the different sessions and are encouraged to bring and discuss successes and wonderings regarding this child. Mindfulness strategies are weaved in throughout the series.

- [Sample ROCK Community of Practice Sessions 1 - 4](#)
 - Topics include: intro to trauma, idea of focus child, introduction of strategies, emotional literacy, self-regulation, building relationships with families

TOOLS



OTHER PLC TOOLS: SURVEYS

Gathering feedback from educators is critical for continuous program improvement as well as to measure the impact of ROCK .

- [ROCK Strategies Survey](#): This survey, to be used once ROCK strategies are in place, is designed to show the impact of ROCK supports. It includes questions developed with educators and items from the [validated ARTIC scale](#) measuring attitudes towards trauma-responsive care.
- [Teacher Opinion Survey](#): This survey is conducted at the beginning (pre) of the PLC and then at the end (post).
- [PLC Exit Ticket](#): This is one way of collecting feedback at each PLC session, based on a template from Shawn Bryant, Founding Director, Yes to ECE.

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I thought the (ROCK Strategies) survey was definitely helpful and hit many key points and self reflection on how I interact with the students and staff. Also, how the students are functioning in the classroom environment and what materials are being utilized. It was very insightful. It assisted me in seeing some of the things I am doing consistently and also in some of the areas I can improve upon.” - Shannon, teacher at Manzanita Child Development Center and PLC participant

ROCK LEVELS OF SUPPORT

It is critical to recognize that this work takes time. This document is one way of structuring different levels of support for schools as they move through the program. As the work grows, the conversations deepen, and at the same time, the facilitator might step back.

- [Levels of Support](#)

TRAUMA RESPONSIVE, RESILIENCE BUILDING COACHING

Coaching and consultation on social-emotional, trauma-responsive and resilience building practices can be offered in different modalities with experienced facilitators.

- [Center for Optimal Brain Integration](#) (COBI) offers many learning platforms for individuals, small programs and larger organizations, including a Trainer Institute.

OTHER RESOURCES

[Pediatric ACEs and Related Life Events Screener \(PEARLS\)](#)

[ACEs screening in CA – Q and A with Dr. Dayna Long](#)

[Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center](#)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ROCK lifts up the collective skills, knowledge and cultural assets of individuals and agencies within Oakland as critical expertise. Partners have included Oakland Unified School District Early Childhood Education Department, City of Oakland Head Start/Early Head Start, New Teacher Center, Early Learning Lab, YMCA of the East Bay, childhood social emotional and/or trauma-responsive practices experts, Dr. Julie Nicholson, Julie Kurtz (Center for Optimal Brain Integration), Shawn Bryant and data and evaluation experts Hailey Jordan, Keith Welch and Engage R+D.

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We also want to express our sincere gratitude to all of the teachers, instructional assistants and diverse service providers who participate in ROCK, as well as our valued leadership team and partners in the ROCK community.



CITATIONS

ACEs Aware, [ACE Fundamentals](#), October 2023.

Let's Get Healthy California, [Adverse childhood experiences have a lasting, harmful effect on health and wellbeing](#), October 2023.

Nicholson, Perez, Kurtz, Bryant, and Giles (2023). [Trauma-Informed Practices for Early Childhood Educators: Relationship-Based Approaches that Reduce Stress, Build Resilience and Support Healing in Young Children](#). Routledge.



**Oakland Starting
Smart & Strong**

ABOUT OAKLAND STARTING SMART AND STRONG

The OSSS collective vision of success is that all children, families, and early educators flourish in Oakland. Over our history, we have moved from a focus on kindergarten readiness to a broader framework that addresses root causes of early learning, child well being, and family support disparities.

Our work proves that restorative, healing, and racially just work can take place when systems center the priorities of the most impacted early educators and families.



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