

**TRAUMA
TOOLBOX**
A HOW-TO GUIDE
by Karen Gross

**How To Create Trauma Toolboxes
and Why They Matter**



“We become what we behold. We shape our tools,
and thereafter our tools shape us.”

— Marshall McLuhan

Introduction

We are living in a time of immense complexity, filled with stress and anxiety and trauma (and its symptomology). We need concrete strategies to help us manage all these feelings in our day-to-day lives. We often do not recognize how all these feelings are negatively affecting our mental and physical well-being. This is true for both adults and children. Another key point: the issues are not ending any time soon; so, the need for ameliorating tools is key.

Among other issues, most people have not been trauma trained. And, the good news is that there are tools to deal with trauma symptomology. While serious mental health issues must be handled by professionals in the fields of psychology and psychiatry, there are tools that can be learned and then deployed safely and effectively by educators, social workers, school counselors, community workers and first aid providers.

The trauma toolbox is one such tool.



What is a Trauma Toolbox?

A trauma toolbox is not one thing that is identical for all users. It is a box (or it could be a bag) that contains a wide assortment of age appropriate items that help tame the autonomic nervous system, the system that causes us to show trauma symptomology. This means that what the trauma toolboxes contain can vary depending on the age and stage of those using them. They may differ based on geographic locale, gender, ethnicity and race. They can be tailored to groups and designed with specific demographics in mind.

Virtually all the items in the toolbox, as detailed below, activate the senses of the user. This includes the usual 5 senses: sight, smell, taste, touch and hear. But, it can also extend to 2 added senses: balance and intuition.

Despite these differences in terms of “what is in the box,” trauma toolboxes share certain characteristics that explain why and how they work to ameliorate trauma symptomology.

When we are deeply stressed or anxious or traumatized, our bodies respond. This is known as the fight, flight, freeze, fawn and faint responses. The bottom line of these responses is that they shut down neural pathways and make it difficult for individuals to concentrate, to learn new material, to exhibit memory, to express feeling, to think rationally, to process information and to engage and connect with others.

Trauma toolboxes work at different levels to ameliorate these symptoms – which impede learning and psychosocial development. Toolboxes are, in essence, a mechanism for helping individuals control their trauma symptomology.

While knowing that one has trauma symptomology is beneficial (if you can name it, you can tame it), it is not a prerequisite to using a trauma toolbox. Just using what is in the box is helpful. And, later, one can develop an understanding of why the toolbox works.



How the Toolbox Works and Why

Start with the term “Toolbox.” It is helpful in addressing trauma (even if one takes out the word “trauma” which is troubling to some). The very name suggests that something can be “fixed,” that there actually are tools that can benefit individuals struggling with trauma symptomology. That knowledge alone is powerful. Even looking at the box, without touching anything inside of it, can message the power of the box and the impact it can have on individuals. The toolbox becomes, then, a symbol of practical resources but also inner resources.

A toolbox is also not an elite item. It is not a fancy theory; it is not something only used by the rich or the entitled. A toolbox is about working, and it is about what we need to work effectively. In earlier centuries, there was something called the poor man’s toolbox. Instead of a big wooden box with a myriad of differing tools, all the tools in the poor man’s toolbox were housed within – kind of like those modern screwdrivers where you take off the cap and other tools are within the tool handle. The point here is that the toolbox is for everyone; and it has the tools we need to improve what needs mending.

On yet another level, a toolbox is like a library of actual resources that are available to a person. It is like a reminder that we have skills and strategies to help us navigate and fix what ails us. And, there is value in not having an empty box; the key is the toolbox has items in it. The items can be added to or changed. They can become more complex. They can be shared (recognizing COVID restrictions). A toolbox is refillable and evolving; one can always be on the lookout for items to add into it.

On yet another level, the toolbox is something one can show to, share with or give to someone. Showing and sharing one’s toolbox has intimacy; it is like sharing one’s diary or photo album. What works for a person may help another person. In a sense, it is a recognition of the trauma we are all experiencing and the possibility of amelioration. Note, though, that the amount of actual sharing is limited due to COVID restrictions.

“Toolbox” is also a software term that relates to the items/icons that enable a computer user to access common functions. In this sense, a toolbox is an aide, a facilitator. Different computer toolboxes have different icons. Some are geared to artists; some are geared to learning computer functions. Some toolboxes are for writers; some are for presenters and teachers. In a sense, the software term “toolbox” is like an entry gate: it lets folks into a computer program. The trauma toolbox serves something of the same function: it eases individuals into a set of tools that can help them deal with trauma and they are not complex or inaccessible or confusing. They are designed – like the computer toolboxes – for ease of use and they recognize commonalities of users.

And, toolboxes can be conversation starters. Students may not be keen on sharing feelings to each other or adults (or identifying them within themselves) but they can use their toolboxes together and start conversations about the items in the box and what can be done with them. There is actually a term “toolbox talks,” defined as a short conversation between an employer and employees where workplace safety is addressed. Since trauma erodes safety, toolbox chats generated by the trauma toolbox are, in a very real sense, a discussion about safety.

Finally, the most significant ameliorating strategy for trauma symptomology is reciprocity, and the trauma toolbox can generate collaboration and cooperation among two or more individuals. It can engage people together, even as they work on their own with the tools in their box. Picture a group of students each with their toolbox, looking at what the other gathered students are doing and creating with their toolboxes. That’s reciprocity – even as each person is using his/her own toolbox.

What Goes In a Trauma Toolbox?

1. Start with a wooden or cardboard or metal or plastic box (or a durable bag or sack).

The container selected can be plain and simple. Or, it could be complex with words on it or even a non-traditional shape. It should be relatively small so it can be transported from place to place or put easily on a small table. It should be at least 8 inches long and 3 inches deep and 4 inches wide.

A few options to consider: there could be a place on the front or side of the box for the name of the user and the name of the box. The selected box can be painted or decorated, all in the style of the user or, if prepared by others, in an appealing and engaging way. Some boxes can have inspirational words on the cover.

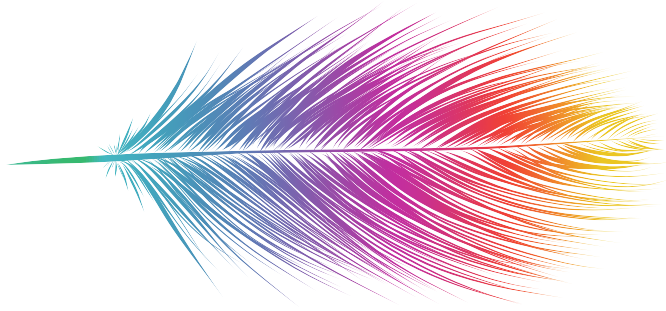


2. Next we can consider items that go in the box, recognizing that they are different for different ages and stages.

Taste: This is the simplest item. Try a wrapped candy that people like. Lifesavers are a good choice given the multiple meaning of the word. And, they are easily replaced. Avoid things that melt or get messy or have peanuts or other items to which folks could be allergic.

Smell: The idea is to include items that are pleasantly scented. Consider: small packets of lavender seeds or pine scents (a pine cone works) or a scented block of wax. Some dried flowers would work too. The goal is to provide something that a person can lift to their nose to activate their sense of smell but it needs to be comforting or uplifting for a wide range of people (not like the perfume that overwhelms in elevators).





Touch: There are no shortage of items that activate the sense of touch and the box needs to contain a wide range of them. These can be squishy balls and soft stuffed items (animals or Kimochis). Finger puppets work.

Feathers are sensational because they can be used to trace one's hands and rub one's neck. They can be colorful and cheerful and of different sizes and textures. Pipe cleaners are useful as are construction toys; these allow for continuous touch. One can use them as actual fans, feeling the flow of air on our faces. Instead of feathers, one can use several cloth swatches: velvet or velour or alpaca. The point is to have tactile sensation.

One added item can be stones or ceramic pieces with positive and empowering words on them: Happy; Hope; Delight; Proud; Engaged; Calm; Caring; Kind; Strong.

Watch for a later discussion on the choice of "Hope" as a word to use. One can add negative words too but only if there are enough positive words to offset them.





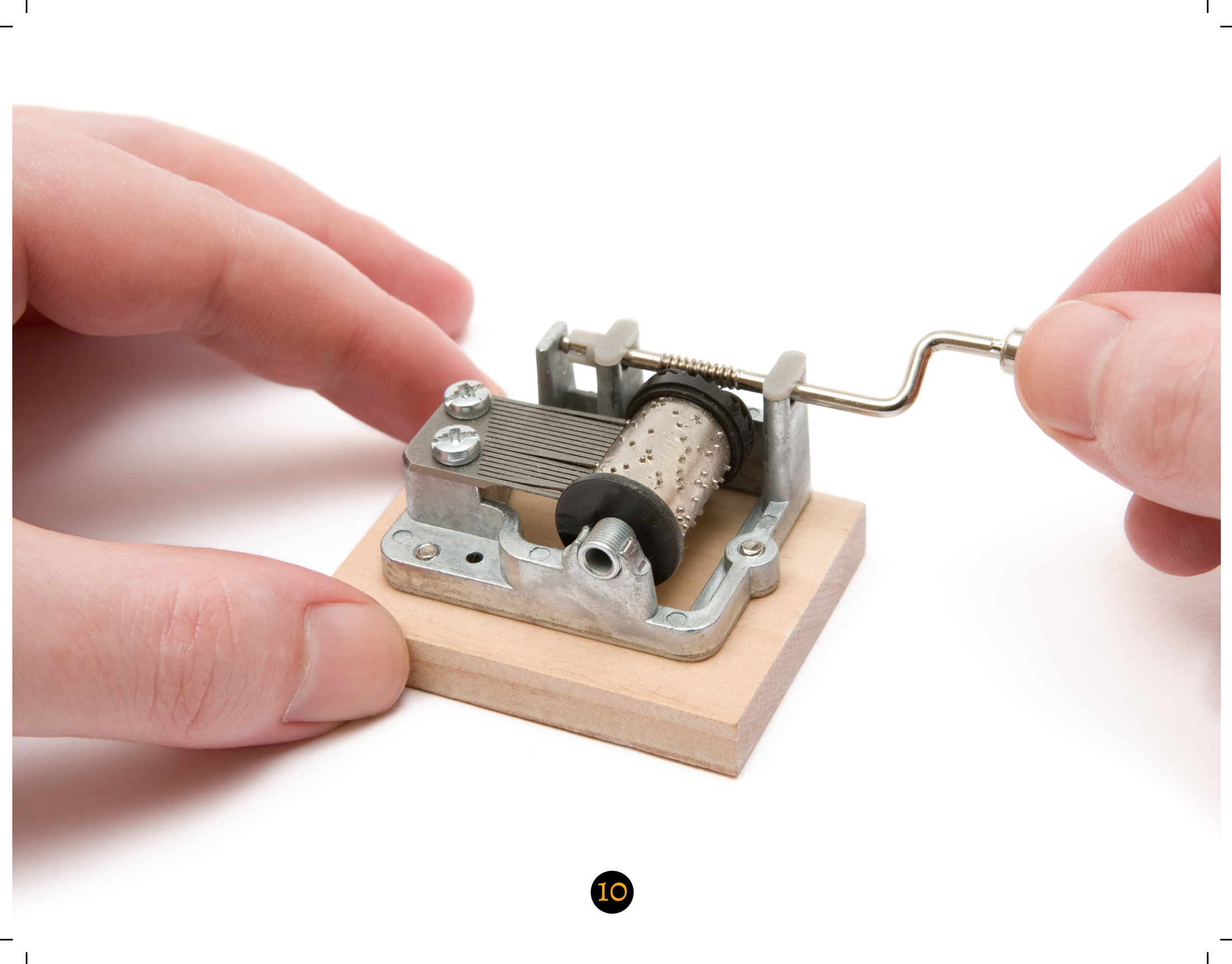


Sight: There are a number of ways to activate sight: nice images; a decorated small notebook with a pencil or crayon; colorful engaging items like marbles and disks. Just seeing these visually exciting objects is useful. A mini telescope is good; mini-stained glass or sea glass are effective too. A person can write words and then see them and read them (more on sound in the next item). Positive sayings on cardboard or metal or plastic are beneficial too. They inspire.

Another item is worry dolls, commonly used in Latin America. Worry beads are beneficial too. These are visually appealing and they come with pre-determined meaning. For example, the worry dolls are something to which one can give one's worries for a night and they hold them safe.

Sound: Auditory use is important because we can be hearing negative sounds around us all the time (fighting, shrill voices, sirens, shooting, fires, storms). Try mini instruments – horns, bells, mini-records, mini-drums, small keyboards. Mini music boxes that can be opened to release sound or activated by the turning of a crank are good.





Bottom line: These boxes do not need to be identical but what each box shares are tools that lower the autonomic nervous system response to trauma, activate the senses and encourage creativity, reflection and engagement. Note, too, that a single item can active several senses at once. A crayon and paper can be visually appealing; paper and crayons feel good too; crayons have a unique scent too.



Who Creates the Toolboxes?

This poses a unique question that can be answered in many different ways. And, the answers are dependent on the Pandemic and one's pedagogical orientation as well as the ages and stages of the students for whom the trauma toolboxes are intended. Options include:

1. Educators can design and complete the toolboxes and give them to students (in person or via mail or in some "pick up" scenario);

2. Students can create the toolboxes with educators, including decorating the boxes and filling them with pre-set items the educator has available;

3. Students can create the boxes from piles of materials and contents prepared by educators so that the boxes are filled with items of particular interest to them.

For example, there could be a range of tactile items and students could select the three or four they wanted. This is more challenging in a time of COVID although there could be an online selection process or the wearing of gloves.

4. Students can create boxes for each other and then there is a sharing of boxes – anonymous – so students do not choose from whom they get a box.

5. Educators can create boxes for each other or for themselves, using the same materials used for their students or that they select.



How the Toolbox Can be Used and Different Strategies to Employ

1. Individuals can use the toolbox on their own. They can use it when they are feeling out-of-sorts. This can be while they are at home or online or in school. Toolboxes can travel. And, it would be wise for educators to have several extras in case students do not have theirs in school and they need it (COVID precautions in place).
2. Educators could create times in the day when students can use the toolboxes or can suggest that a particular student use a toolbox if that student is struggling to engage and connect or concentrate.
3. Students can use their toolboxes in groups with other students, each using their own toolbox but sharing the experience and showing particular items of appeal.
4. Educators can direct students to use particular parts of the toolboxes so the class is all using feathers or the class is all using their mini instruments. It is a form of “break” but it also enables coordinated effort. This is something that can also work for those teaching online and in person simultaneously.
5. Educators can ask students to do balance exercises holding the toolboxes or they can have them try to balance the toolboxes on the backs of their hands or on their fingertips.
6. Educators can suggest the creation of extra toolboxes to deliver to others with a special note – engaging the empathy engines by doing for others.

7. There can be special stories tied to the toolboxes and their contents. For example, consider the stone/ceramic pieces with names on them. There can be activities tied to the actual words – exploring feelings and perhaps using The Feeling Alphabet Activity Set to further feeling activities. Find the book here: <http://www.karengrosseducation.com/thefeelingalphabet>

8. If there is a stone or phrase using the word “hope,” consider this exercise: Ideally, the hope stone would be placed at the bottom of the trauma toolbox, as a reminder of the Greek myth involving Pandora and her box. When Pandora opened her box against orders, she released evil spirits onto the earth. Opening Pandora’s box has become shorthand for all the negative consequences that can flow from raising and talking about difficult issues. But, what we often forget is that there is one item that never escaped from Pandora’s box: HOPE. And while there are differing interpretations as to why HOPE never left her box, I prefer this explanation. HOPE stayed in the box to remind us that whatever bad things occur, we must hold out hope. It is the pathway forward; without hope, we have no future.

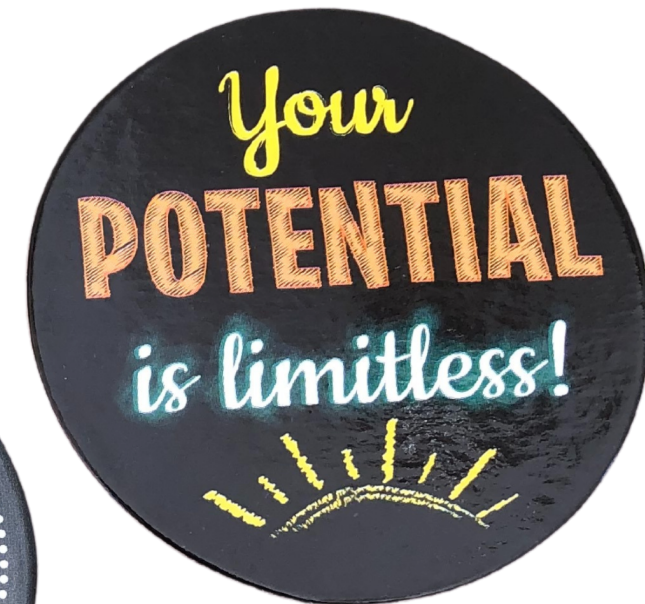
9. While some students may become attached to their toolboxes, others may not connect so easily. There should be opportunities to change out items in the toolbox and bring new items into the toolbox. For some students, this may increase their connection to their toolbox.

10. Imagine other activities tied to tools and toolboxes – construction projects using real tools; drawing tools; looking at antique handmade tools (which are stunning and many are valuable); stories involving tools and toolboxes. Consider this ebook: [*What Can You Do with a Toolbox?*](#) by Anthony Carrino and John Colaneri. Look, too, at [*The Toolbox*](#) by Anne Rockwell for younger students.

For older students, look at this book: [*The Toolbox Book : A Craftsman's Guide to Tool Chests, Cabinets and Storage Systems*](#) by Jim Tolpin. It can be used to study tools through the amazing toolboxes that individuals have created over time and across cultures.

11. Consider the creation of specific toolboxes – writer’s toolboxes, kitchen toolboxes, scientist’s toolboxes, toolboxes suited to different cultures.

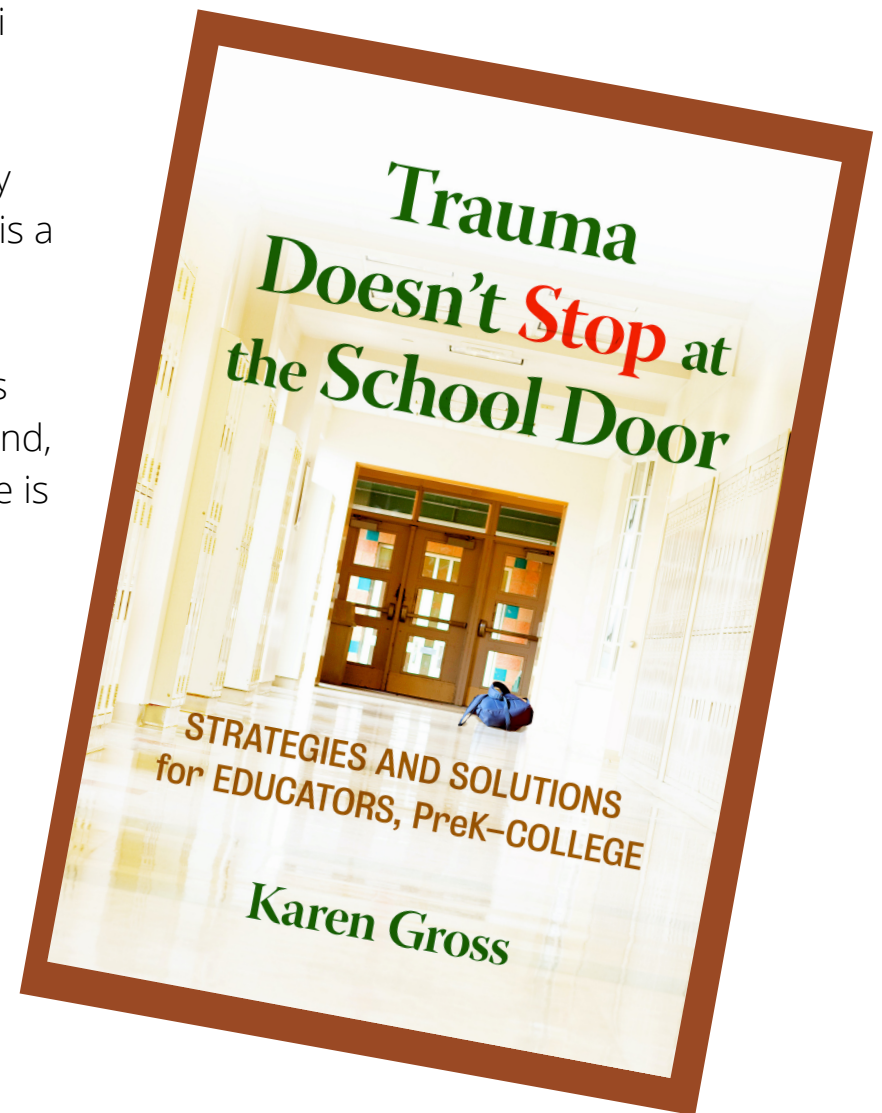
12. Then, there can be story telling toolboxes for actual use with stories or to be given to younger students. Visually impaired students often use story toolboxes to help them appreciate the contents of a particular story.



Conclusions

One could call these trauma response toolboxes the mini equivalent of play tables, a notion developed in ***Trauma Doesn't Stop at the School Door***. The idea is that when trauma rears its head, play can be best strategy. And, play should not be mistaken for absence of learning. No, play is a critical activity that allows one to be creative, feel less tension, engage alone or with others or both, develop a sense of relief. Playing is often something that disappears from the landscape of traumatized children and adults. And, some adults think play has no place in one's life when one is "mature." Wrong. Restoring play, whether through the toolbox or the play table, is a key strategy for helping alleviate trauma.

Share the toolboxes you create. I would welcome seeing them and hearing about their use and am happy to post what others are doing with their toolboxes.



About the Author



Karen Gross

Karen Gross is an author and educator who specializes in trauma and student success academically and psychosocially. In addition to her writing and speaking engagements, she teaches students of all ages and at all stages from PreK through graduate school. She is the author of more than nine children's books (in addition to her adult books), all of which are trauma responsive. She is the pet parent of the Feeling Sleuth-Hound.

karengrosscooper@gmail.com

www.KarenGrossEducation.com

Copyright 2020