



Responding to Trauma in Your Classroom

Bad Behavior or Reacting to Trauma?

Think of a student who challenges you. Have you observed any of these behaviors in that student?

- Excessive anger
- Unusual startle reactions
- Loss of appetite
- Extreme fatigue
- Physical or verbal aggression
- Regular tardiness or absence from class
- Perfectionistic, controlling or anxious behavior
- Difficulty concentrating
- Frequent headaches or stomachaches
- Low self-confidence
- Irritability
- Clinginess
- Trouble making friends
- Self-harm or suicidal ideation
- Hoarding
- Risky behaviors (including drug or alcohol abuse or sexual acting out)
- Panic attacks
- Extreme self-reliance
- Running away
- Defiance
- Alienation from peers

If you've observed even some of these behaviors (or other troubling symptoms), you may have a student who is directly or indirectly

DID YOU KNOW?

More than 60 percent of children [have been] exposed to at least one type of violence within the past year.

—National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention,
Childhood Trauma and Its Effect On Healthy Development



experiencing trauma. Trauma can be defined as the reaction to a shocking or painful event or series of negative events. Some traumas require immediate intervention and court-mandated reporting; others go by unmarked. Regardless of whether or not you are aware of the details, there are things you can do to mitigate the effects of trauma for individual students and for all students in your classroom.

Source: Mental Health Connection of Tarrant County

What Causes Trauma?

Trauma affects the ways individuals feel, think and behave. It influences self-perception as well as beliefs about other people and the world.

Though this list is not exhaustive, traumatic experiences can include:

- Medical crises
- Accidents or injuries (like a house fire or car collision that threatens the student’s safety)
- Bullying or harassment
- Family separation (due to incarceration, deployment, divorce, foster placement or death)
- Natural disaster
- Abuse (emotional, physical or sexual)
- Neglect
- Observation of domestic, community or school violence
- Substance abuse
- Mental illness
- Terrorism and war
- Instability due to being unhoused
- Poverty
- Overt discrimination or constant microaggressions
- Refugee or undocumented status

More students may suffer trauma—or suffer more trauma—than you can see or know. Trauma is difficult to assess and identify; it’s also specific to the individual. An event that may traumatize one person may not traumatize another person. Moreover, the same event may lead to different trauma symptoms in different people.

Source: The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

Responding to Trauma

Proactively applying trauma-informed classroom strategies benefits all students. Students respond positively when educators get to know their individual circumstances, affirm their identities and cultivate empathy in the classroom. Here are some ideas to consider incorporating in your teaching practice:



Establish social and emotional safety in your classroom.

Social and emotional safety is the cornerstone of positive classroom outcomes. Research shows that students need to feel both physically and emotionally safe to learn. Students experiencing trauma, including bias, bullying and social isolation, are more likely to feel unsafe.

STRATEGIES • Classroom contracts • Explicit anti-bullying or community-building curricula • Timely interventions in conflicts and hurtful exchanges • Teaching and modeling of empathy and active listening skills



Create a behavior-management plan that focuses on positive reinforcement.

Discipline and behavior management are central to classroom culture and often present unique challenges for students responding to traumatic events or experiences. Foster compassion for and among your students. Focus on praising students for appropriate classroom behavior, not on punishment.

STRATEGIES • Implement student-generated agreements and contracts • Adopt “zero indifference” (NOT zero-tolerance) policies • Seek out training in restorative justice techniques • Explore stress-management strategies to diffuse tense situations and help students process feelings in the moment • Give students opportunities to demonstrate their strengths



Increase your self-awareness and trauma competency.

Increase your knowledge about trauma and how it may manifest for your students. Remember, students respond to trauma in different ways, and their responses may be influenced by cultural traditions, religious beliefs or familial relationships. Connect with students and their families to identify resources and services that can inform how best to support students who experience trauma.

STRATEGIES • Seek professional development on working with specific identity groups • Share support resources with other educators • Connect with community organizations • Engage in ongoing self-assessment and reflection on your trauma responsiveness

Additional Resources

Critical Practices for Anti-bias Education
[A Teaching Tolerance publication](#)

“Helping Students Navigate a Violent World”
[A Teaching Tolerance blog](#)

“Teaching Between Worlds”
[A Teaching Tolerance blog](#)

“Shelter From the Storm”
[A Teaching Tolerance magazine feature—Issue 49](#)

“Teaching Through Trauma: How poverty affects kids’ brains”
[Southern California Public Radio](#)

“Racism’s Psychological Toll”
[The New York Times](#)

“Child and Adolescent Refugee Trauma”
[National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#)

The Effects of Complex Trauma on Youth
[Judicial Council of California Administrative Office of the Courts](#)



Nearly half of children and adolescents were assaulted at least once in the past year.

—National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention,
Childhood Trauma and Its Effect On Healthy Development