

Developing Trauma-Sensitive Classrooms to Support Students and Educators

January 2024

Three major categories of evidence-based classroom strategies that educators can use to minimize the activation of students’ trauma responses are: the creation of emotionally and physically safe learning environments, the use of positive behavior supports and social-emotional learning strategies, and awareness of and access to appropriate accommodations and services to support students’ strengths and needs. When delivered with care and with attention to students’ and families’ historical, racial and cultural experiences, these strategies can support all students, not only those impacted by trauma.



Create safe, predictable, and transparent classroom environments

Strategy	Examples
Promote physical and emotional safety.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create spaces for students to practice self-regulation. • Respect and recognize diversity in classroom materials.
Create consistent schedules and predictable routines.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimize transitions; use phrases, signals, and explicit cues when necessary. • Implement consistent daily routines. • Alert students to changes or things out of routine.
Establish an environment that is less likely to activate trauma responses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice skills that can reduce trauma responses, such as stretching and deep breathing. • Use rhythmic music to promote a sense of calm in the classroom. • Implement a calm corner and sensory breaks for students who are feeling stressed. • Be aware of specific events which may activate specific students’ trauma responses and warn them individually.
Provide grounding and choice to increase self-control and sense of agency.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do a daily check-in with choices about assignments. • Discuss past and future activities and student preferences about content and format, where possible.

(Bethell et al., 2014; Cole et al., 2013; NCSSLE, 2020; Shonkoff & Garner, 2012; SAMHSA, 2014).



Use positive behavior supports and social-emotional learning

Strategy	Example
Set up classroom behavioral expectations and promote positive classroom climate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Involve students in developing simple and short rules; share these with families. Establish morning meetings and community-building circles that promote respect and belonging.
Use short, clear, sequenced instructions and repeat them often.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support students whose memory systems are under stress by repeating instructions often and reinforcing their engagement/participation.
Implement evidence-based behavioral interventions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reinforce behavioral expectations in multiple ways. Set clear limits and logical consequences for inappropriate behaviors. Use de-escalation and stress-management strategies to defuse tense situations and improve emotional regulation.

(Eber et al., 2019; Fette et al., 2019; Hyman et al., 2003; Kliwer et al., 1998; Murthi & Espelage, 2005; Scarpa & Haden, 2006; SAMHSA, 2014).



Build awareness of students' needs and referral resources

Strategy	Example
Discuss and assess students' needs and strengths.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discuss students' capacities with family members, other teachers, and other professionals. Be familiar with screening processes and academic and behavioral supports available to promote student success.
Be informed about referral procedures and resources in the school and community.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be familiar with supports such as food security, safe and secure housing, domestic violence services, legal aid, substance abuse services, faith-based supports, and mental health assessment and services.
Make individualized modifications to academic work.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Modify assignments as needed, such as by shortening them or giving extended time. Assist students with organizing and prioritizing assignments. Identify techniques to help students manage emotions and focus. Seek support from mental health professionals. Create individualized behavior support/safety plans.

(Chafouleas et al., 2016; Cole et al., 2013; NCSSLE, 2020; SAMHSA, 2014; Wolpow et al., 2009)



Educators can implement all these evidence-based practices following the principle of elevating cultural, historical, and identity issues in the classroom. Elevating these issues entails schools moving past stereotypes and biases; recognizing historical trauma, and implementing policies, processes, and protocols that are responsive to the cultural, racial and ethnic, and identity/intersectionality needs of the individuals served.

Elevate cultural, historical, and identity issues

Strategy	Example
Ensure that different cultural/identity groups and perspectives are represented in your classroom and instruction.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do a cultural/identity inventory of classroom and instructional materials, and improve representativeness if there are groups absent from the materials. Model, share, affirm, and celebrate different cultural histories, achievements, heroes, sayings, and traditions. Apply an instructional approach that considers different perspectives and experiences—current and past—to help students build bridges between known and new topics.
Learn about families' backgrounds, cultures, priorities, and histories while examining your own cultural reference points.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engage frequently and honestly with students and families about their lives, beliefs, and priorities outside of school to build trust and rapport. Examine and address your own cultural reference points, biases, and assumptions.

(Montgomery, 2001; SAMHSA, 2014; Weinstein et al., 2004; Villegas & Lucas, 2007)

Reminder: Avoid re-traumatization: Trauma-sensitive disciplinary practices

Exposure to trauma may interfere with students' abilities to regulate their behaviors and emotions, putting them at greater risk for disciplinary issues. Trauma responses are usually activated by reminders of past traumatic experiences that automatically cause the body to react as if the traumatic event is happening again in that moment. Educators can avoid re-traumatizing students by eliminating the use of potentially traumatic, violent, or punishing disciplinary practices.

Strategy	Example
Be mindful of and minimize activation of trauma responses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Find your style of firmness that conveys safety and confidence rather than danger. Use consequences that are reasonable, fair, and appropriate; avoid punitive and exclusionary discipline.
Respond in a calm and solution-oriented way when students are in distress.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer choices and guide students to a safe or quiet area. Communicate that students are safe and that you are there to support them. Praise a student when they regain control after a moment of distress.
Encourage the use of restorative practices, which are processes that focus on building positive relationships and a sense of community to address and prevent conflict and wrongdoing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate opportunities for students to share with others how they were harmed and how they will work to resolve the harm caused. Provide opportunities for individuals who may have caused harm to engage in a meaningful community service activity that helps to repair a situation.

(Anyon et al., 2014; Augustine et al., 2018; Fronius et al., 2019; McInerney & McKlindon, 2014; NCSSLE, 2020; SAMHSA, 2014)

References

- Anyon, Y., Jenson, J. M., Altschul, I., Farrar, J., McQueen, J., Greer, E., ... Simmons, J. (2014). The persistent effect of race and the promise of alternatives to suspension in school discipline outcomes. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 44, 379-386. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.06.025>
- Augustine, C. H., Engberg, J., Grimm, G. E., Lee, E., Wang, E. L., Christianson, K., & Joseph, A. A. (2018). *Can restorative practices improve school climate and curb suspensions? An evaluation of the impact of restorative practices in a mid-sized urban school district*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2840.html
- Bethell, C. D., Newacheck, P., Hawes, E., & Halfon, N. (2014). Adverse childhood experiences: Assessing the impact on health and school engagement and the mitigating role of resilience. *Health Affairs*, 33(12), 2106-2115. <https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2014.0914>
- Chafouleas, S. M., Johnson, A. H., Overstreet, S., & Santos, N. M. (2016). Toward a blueprint for trauma-informed service delivery in schools. *School Mental Health*, 8(1), 144-162. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-015-9166-8>
- Cole, S. F., Eisner, A., Gregory, M., & Ristuccia, J. (2013). *Helping traumatized children learn: Safe, supportive learning environments that benefit all children* (vol. 2). Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative. <https://traumasensitiveschools.org/tlpi-publications/download-a-free-copy-of-a-guide-to-creating-trauma-sensitive-schools/>
- Eber, L., Barrett, S., Perales, K., Jeffrey-Pearsall, J., Pohlman, K., Putnam, R., Splett, J., & Weist, M. D. (2019). *Advancing education effectiveness: Interconnecting school mental health and school-wide PBIS. Vol. 2: An implementation guide*. Center for Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (funded by the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education). University of Oregon Press. https://global-uploads.webflow.com/5d3725188825e071f1670246/5f6914a88117c9834d0638f8_ISF%20v2%20Implementation%20Guide.pdf
- Fette, C., Lambdin-Pattavina, C., & Weaver, L. L. (2019, May). Understanding and applying trauma-informed approaches across occupational therapy settings. AOTA Continuing Education Article.
- Fronius, T., Darling-Hammond, S., Persson, H., Guckenburg, S., Hurley, N., & Petrosino, A. (2019). *Restorative justice in U.S. schools: An updated research review*. <https://www.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/resource-restorative-justice-in-u-s-schools-an-updated-research-review.pdf>
- Hyman, S. M., Gold, S. N., & Cott, M. A. (2003). Forms of social support that moderate PTSD in childhood sexual abuse survivors. *Journal of Family Violence*, 18(5), 295-300. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1025117311660>
- Kliewer, W., Lepore, S. J., Oskin, D., & Johnson, P. D. (1998). The role of social and cognitive processes in children's adjustment to community violence. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 66(1), 199-209. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.66.1.199>
- McInerney, M., & McKlindon, A. (2014). *Unlocking the door to learning: Trauma-informed classrooms and transformational schools*. Education Law Center. <https://www.elc-pa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Trauma-Informed-in-Schools-Classrooms-FINAL-December2014-2.pdf>
- Montgomery, W. (2001). Creating culturally responsive, inclusive classrooms. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 33(4), 4-9. <https://doi.org/10.1177/004005990103300401>
- Murthi, M., & Espelage, D. L. (2005). Childhood sexual abuse, social support, and psychological outcomes: A loss framework. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 29(11), 1215-1231. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2005.03.008>
- National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE). (2020). Trauma-sensitive schools training package. <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/trauma-sensitive-schools-training-package>
- Park, Y., Linz, M., Lucas-Adkins, C., & Taylor, L. (2021). *Addressing Trauma in Educational Settings* [Training Material/Resource]. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Appalachia. <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Region/appalachia/Resource/-89687>
- Scarpa, A., & Haden, S. C. (2006). Community violence victimization and aggressive behavior: The moderating effects of coping and social support. *Aggressive Behavior*, 32(5), 502-515. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.20151>
- Shonkoff, J. P., & Garner, A. S. (2012). The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress. *Pediatrics*, 129(1), e232-e246. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2011-2663>
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). (2014). *SAMHSA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach*. <https://store.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/d7/priv/sma14-4884.pdf>
- Villegas, A. M., & Lucas, T. (2007). The culturally responsive teacher. *Educational Leadership*, 64(6), 28-33. https://pdo.ascd.org/lmscourses/PD13OC002/media/Module6_CulturallyResponsiveTeacher.pdf
- Weinstein, C. S., Tomlinson-Clarke, S., & Curran, M. (2004). Toward a conception of culturally responsive classroom management. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 55(1), 25-38. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487103259812>
- Wolpow, R., Johnson, M. M., Hertel, R., & Kincaid, S. O. (2009). *The heart of learning and teaching: Compassion, resiliency, and academic success*. Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction Compassionate Schools. https://rems.ed.gov/docs/ospi_theheartoflearningandteaching.pdf

Learn more about REL Appalachia and find additional resources: <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/region/appalachia>

This document was prepared under Contract No. 91990022C0008 by Regional Educational Laboratory Appalachia, administered by SRI. The content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of IES or the U.S. Department of Education, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.