

Trauma-Informed Practices for K12 Schools

Summary of Content

A Trauma-Informed Approach to Teaching Middle School

After completing the simulation, you will be better equipped to identify warning signs, empathetically approach students who are struggling, use communication techniques to learn more about their experience in class, brainstorm instructional modifications that can help them feel more comfortable in class, and refer them to additional supports, if needed.

Understanding Disruptive Behavior

Every day you encounter a range of student behaviors in your classroom. These behaviors can support teaching and learning or they can make it more challenging. Two typical mindsets we have about disruptive behavior are, "She hates my class" or, "He doesn't care about learning." In essence we tend to blame ourselves or the student.

When we use a trauma-informed approach we take into account that these behaviors might be caused by trauma or distress.

Trauma = mental or emotional scars from difficult experiences

In Distress = feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope; could be a sign of trauma

Being trauma-informed means we're keeping in mind that there might be more driving student behavior than we're aware of. We aren't looking to blame anyone for the behavior: not ourselves and not the student. Instead, we're trying to understand what a student might be experiencing in class well enough to propose a modification that will make this behavior less likely in the future. A central part of any modification is showing a student that we care, even when they've been challenging. We're also listening for anything that might warrant a referral so we can connect students to any additional supports they might need.

When communities experience a critical incident, like a hurricane or mass shooting, they are often not prepared to have conversations about the feelings students and faculty, might be having. Working toward being trauma-informed now can help a school community be better prepared if they encounter a critical incident in the future.

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Seeing Below the Surface of Student Behavior

Consider the story of Casey, a student who sometimes shouts out enough in class to pull everyone off topic. His behavior in class is only the tip of the iceberg. Casey's story, like so many of our students, is complex – there's a lot of iceberg under the surface. He acts out in class because things at home are really rough. His father drinks a lot of alcohol, and Casey never knows if his father is going to be drunk or sober or when there will be chaos or peace. His anxious and upset feelings come with him to school and contribute to the behavior he exhibits in class.

Casey would really benefit from a trauma-informed approach. Students who don't have the same homelife difficulties can benefit from this approach as well.

Trauma-Informed Approach

- Understand behavior
- Identify warning signs
- Modify instruction

When we do these three things, we teach from a place of compassion rather than frustration, and our students feel safer and more engaged.

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Warning Signs

When a student exhibits one or more of the following warning signs, there is a chance that their behavior is related to some sort of distress or trauma.

General Warning Signs

- Inattention
- Extreme fatigue
- Hyperactivity
- Social withdrawal
- Distractibility
- Aggression
- Prone to angry outbursts
- General disengagement
- Headaches and stomach cramps

Warning Signs and Student's Age

- **Younger students** are more likely to show their feelings.
- **Older students** may not want to stand out or seem "weak." They may hide their feelings. They may cope by doing dangerous things like driving fast, using drugs, or getting into fights.

Warning Signs and Student's Sex

- **Boys** are more likely to externalize their emotions (act out).
- **Girls** are more likely to internalize their emotions (withdraw).

When you recognize any of these signs, reach out to the students exhibiting them to let them know you care and help them find more constructive ways to cope and succeed in your class.

If you notice that a student regularly seems:

- Anxious,
- Depressed,
- Socially isolated,
- Agitated, or
- Engaging in risky behavior,

In addition to approaching them with compassion, you should strongly consider referring them to a mental health professional in your school or community.

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Adverse Childhood Experiences

One (or more) of your current students is probably experiencing some sort of distress due to trauma. Some researchers refer to these incidents as adverse childhood experiences or ACEs.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)¹

Lived with a parent or guardian who:	Experienced:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Got divorced• Died• Served time in jail or prison• Was mentally ill, suicidal, or severely depressed• Behaved violently• Had a problem with drugs or alcohol	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Violence or witnessed any violence growing up• Food scarcity or displacement

Students of all races and socioeconomic statuses are impacted by trauma. However, if you are working in communities with higher rates of poverty, homelessness/housing insecurity or incarceration it's likely that there are multiple students in your classroom who have experienced or are experiencing trauma.

Quick Statistics on ACEs

- 3 out of 5 children experience **one ACE** before age 18
- 1 in 3 children experience **more than one ACE** before age 18

¹ Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., . . . Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14(4), 245-258.

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The Brain and the Body

A person's brain is in **learning mode** when they feel safe. They can predict what will happen in their environment, and all their basic needs are met. They can control their emotions and focus on learning.

But when a person, especially a child, has any experience with an unsafe environment or intense danger, their brains are rewired to be on guard for more harm or neglect. The world isn't a safe or nurturing place anymore; it can be a *terrifying* place.

When a child feels threatened or overwhelmed, or when something reminds them of a traumatic event, their brains go into **reactive mode**. Their body is getting ready to respond to something bad in one of three ways: fight, flee, or freeze.

Fighting = becoming physically or verbally aggressive.

Fleeing = getting out of a physical or social situation, or avoiding it in the first place.

Freezing = becoming silent, unresponsive, or in a daze.

Our brains have these instincts for a reason; they're a good way to respond to real danger. But they aren't so practical in our classrooms. When a student is fighting, fleeing, or freezing, they might not even realize what's happening or why they're acting in this way.

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Are Student Behaviors Personal?

Student behaviors like these can feel pretty personal:

- Spits on your shoe
- Refuses to do any work at all
- Makes fun of something you said
- Won't stop talking to a friend
- Insults you or classmates
- Won't lift their head off the desk

These actions could also indicate that a student is struggling. Many times, the best way to address this kind of behavior is to look past our hurt feelings, talk with the student, and find out what feelings or circumstances led to their behavior. We should still hold them accountable for their behavior, but if we only discipline students without understanding them, their behavior is likely to continue and possibly worsen.

Case Study: Charlie

As you probably know, when you start to feel concerned that a student is struggling academically, socially and/or emotionally, taking some notes on what you are noticing can help you prepare for a conversation with them. Here's an example of what Mr. Bauer, Charlie's teacher, observed recently:

Academic Performance	Social Emotional Clues
<p>Charlie is a hard working student, who clearly loves books. She keeps up with the assigned reading.</p> <p>Her class participation grade dropped recently.</p>	<p>Sometimes, when called on, Charlie has no idea what the class has been discussing.</p> <p>Working with other students goes well sometimes. Other times, she doesn't want to talk at all.</p> <p>She cried when asked about a recent drop in her participation grade and pleaded to be able to stay in "honors" the following year.</p>

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Useful Techniques

There are several techniques that can be helpful when meeting with a student who could use some extra support like Charlie.²

✓ Ask Open-ended Questions

Open-ended questions invite answers that are longer than a few words. They allow students to reflect and they usually elicit helpful information.

Example...

"What kinds of things do you usually think about during class discussions?"

✓ Express Empathy

When we let a student know that we're trying to understand their challenges, it helps build trust and it shows we're listening.

Example...

"Sometimes I have a hard time focusing when there's a lot on my mind."

✓ Offer Praise or Appreciation

All students respond well to praise or appreciation. The more specific you can make it the more they'll trust what you are saying.

Example...

"You're keeping up with the reading no matter what, which shows you care about the class."

✓ Share Neutral Observations

It's easier to take in "facts" that are offered without judgement. Staying neutral helps us talk about difficult things without putting students on the defensive.

Example...

"It sounds like this specific book has made it challenging for you to focus."

✓ Brainstorm Helpful Solutions

Take some time to hear about a student's struggles and offer them some say in what solutions you might try out. It can go a long way to making a student more comfortable in class.

Example...

"How would you feel if you could do the next discussion with a partner of your choice?"

² Examples were options that were available during the conversation with Charlie.

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✓ Refer Them After Building Trust

It's important to build up your rapport with a student before you suggest they speak with a counselor. They are far more likely to say yes when this happens.

Example...

"How would you feel about talking to Ms. Ines, the school counselor? A lot of students find that helpful."

Unhelpful Techniques

✗ Dismissing Feelings or Thoughts

No one tries to be dismissive, but students can feel dismissed and unheard when we don't acknowledge their experience.

Example...

"It's good when we read books that make us uncomfortable."

✗ Offering Advice

We've all ignored advice we've been given, yet we still give advice to students sometimes. There are much more effective choices, like problem solving together.

Example...

"I focus better when I make eye contact with people. You should try that."

✗ Including Judgment or a Label

Non-neutral statements can put students on the defensive. It's also important to stay away from labeling a student's behavior because this can frighten them.

Example...

"Charlie. You clearly have a problem and need to talk to someone."

✗ Reinforce Rules/Standards

Students are usually pretty aware of expectations already. Reminding them is not a reliable way to move toward positive change.

Example...

"Charlie. You still have to participate even if you don't like the book."

Knowing When to Refer

Sometimes, a student will reveal an intention to harm themselves or the people around them, or that they're living in an unhealthy or unsafe environment. Follow your school's protocol for mandatory reporting. If your school has dedicated mental-health support staff. You should also talk to them about the students you're most concerned about.

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Supporting Students Who Are Not Exhibiting Warning Signs

When a student suffers a loss, or even a whole community experiences a critical incident, we know that many students might be in distress. But what if some of them are not showing any warning signs?

Consider a student like Ray. Ray lost her dad during a hurricane. Overall, Ray seemed fine and her grades stayed high. She didn't show warning signs, but her teacher expressed her condolences and checked-in a few times anyway. Later, Ray said she had been struggling and this approach had helped keep her afloat. Reaching out to students like Ray puts you on their resilience-building team. This is important because these students can be at risk for anxiety, depression, and a variety of risky behaviors.

Doing a whole-class activity like a breathing exercise can help all of your students notice and better manage their feelings. Here's an example:

1. Breathe

Take three deep breaths.

2. Be still

For the next minute stay as still and quiet as you can (Build to 3 minutes for older students.)

3. Take your emotional temperature

While you are being still, notice your thoughts (what you're thinking), sensations (how your body feels), and your feelings (try not to judge them).

Teachers who regularly use exercises like this one see improvements in their students' self-esteem, confidence, resilience and achievement.

Checking in with a student, building trust, encouraging them to share, problem solving an instructional modification and making a referral, if needed, is a lot to ask on top of everything you are already doing. But making these efforts will mean a lot for all of your students and they increase the chances that you can keep everyone, including yourself, in learning mode.