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Create Trauma Sensitive Learning Environments

by Cynthia Merse | Mar 15, 2018



Being a young person today is not easy. Many are under stress to perform well in school, get into a good college, or excel on the playing field. But what about students who are stressed because they need to earn money to put food on the table for their family? Or those who are suffering from abuse or neglect or who have witnessed a violent act? Unfortunately, trauma plays a role in the daily lives of more students than we realize and it's not always easy to recognize. The recent school shooting in Florida makes it abundantly clear that we need to care for the social-emotional well-being of our students. This includes acknowledging and addressing trauma in the classroom.

According to the [National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments](#), one out of every four schoolchildren has been exposed to a traumatic event and approximately two out of three children have been exposed to violence. Just as sobering is the finding from a [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study](#) that more than 35 percent of children have experienced two or more Adverse Childhood Experiences, such as physical abuse, drug addiction, exposure to mental illness, or the incarceration of a family member. Traumatic stress can **significantly impact** a child's normal development and result in antisocial behavior and isolation, difficulty trusting themselves or others, and increased emotional and mental problems. Further, these children often find themselves in perpetual "survival" mode and may react in inappropriate ways, such as by fighting, spacing out in class, or even engaging in self-harm. This takes a toll on a child's social-emotional health, as well as his or her's classroom performance, including higher rates of absenteeism, falling grades, conflicts with classmates, and a greater likelihood of getting suspended or expelled.

As an educator, you want to create conditions in your classroom that make it possible for ALL students to learn and feel welcome. Luckily, there are things you can do right now that don't require an extreme classroom makeover. Consider these four steps as starting points for creating a "trauma sensitive" classroom.

Know the Signs

Perhaps the first and most important step you can take is to familiarize yourself with the potential signs of trauma. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network **recommends** that you keep an eye out for changes in behavior (e.g., withdrawal, aggression, irritability, inability to concentrate), fear and anxiety, absenteeism, increased complaints about headaches or stomachaches, and difficulty responding to authority. Every child will react to trauma in different ways. That's why it's crucial that you take the time to get to know each and every student at the start of each school year.

Establish Positive Relationships

Getting to know your students is only half the battle. You must also foster positive relationships between yourself and your students, as well as among the students themselves. This starts by creating a classroom culture of respect for one another and letting students know that they can come to you for support and advice. Set clear and

predictable classroom routines, rules, and expectations and provide opportunities for students to have a voice and choice.

Nashville, Tennessee's Fall-Hamilton Elementary School takes this a step further by [establishing mentor-mentee relationships](#) between students and adults on staff who are not the students' teachers. Students meet with their mentors for two minutes at the start and end of each school day. According to principal Mathew Portell, some students need a little more attention and support "on an educational level, but more of a social and emotional level as well...every day they come into this building (knowing) that somebody's excited to see them."

Make Mindfulness a Habit

Another step you can take is to adopt mindfulness practices, such as yoga or deep breathing techniques, as part of daily classroom routines. Mindfulness practices can help teach students how to calm down and self-regulate their emotions, essential skills when the stress of trauma can become overwhelming. One researcher who is [studying the effects](#) of mindfulness exercises on students from Chicago's roughest neighborhoods is finding that teachers and principals who spend time on mindfulness end up with more instruction time. They also report that students refocus and calm down more quickly after transitions and upsets, respectively, making their classrooms more efficient.

Create Comforting, Calm Environments

The physical environment in your classroom can also play a role in helping students who are experiencing trauma or stress to feel calm, safe, and secure. Designate a corner of the room as a safe and quiet place where students can go if they are feeling overwhelmed. This "comfort zone" can be as simple or elaborate as you like (this can also be a great way to incorporate student choice by allowing students to choose what goes in this corner). "Beanbag" chairs, large pillows, blankets, and stuffed animals are good choices. Additional actions you can take include keeping your classroom neat and clean, eliminating clutter, and choosing cool, soothing colors to decorate your walls.

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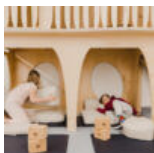
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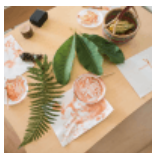
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