

8 Ways to Support Students Who Experience Trauma

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Children, adolescents and teens in your classroom have experienced or are experiencing ongoing trauma.

According to studies from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 60% of adults report experiencing abuse or other difficult family circumstances during childhood and 26% of children in the United States will witness or experience a traumatic event before they turn four.

The impacts of trauma can be far-reaching, long-lasting, and impact students' ability to access their education. There are small ways, however, that we can make our classrooms more friendly and supportive to students managing the impacts of trauma.

As with many strategies to support a sub-group of students, these strategies can positively support most students with or without a history of trauma.

1. Communicate with counselors or social workers. Besides providing specific information about your students, these are great resources for more information about recognizing and understanding the impacts of trauma.

2. Provide structure and consistency. Write the agenda on the board. Use entry and exit routines. When a student knows what to expect, it can help her to feel safe.

3. Ease transitions. Give time warnings ahead of activity transitions ("3 minutes until we switch groups..."). Warn ahead of doing something unexpected, such as turning off the lights or making a loud sound. If possible, prepare students for fire drills.

4. Provide choice. People with trauma history experience a lack of control. Provide safe ways for students to exercise choice and control within an activity and within the environment (choice of seats, choice of book, etc).

5. Develop strengths and interests. Focus on an area of competence and encourage its development to contribute to positive self-concept.

6. Be there. A lot of working with students with trauma history is just showing up, every day, and accepting the student no matter what behaviors emerge. Be an adult in that student's life who is going to accept him and believe in him, no matter what - children can never have too many supportive adults in their lives.

7. Make an “out” plan. Create a way for a student to take space if she feels triggered or overwhelmed during class. Designate a space in the school building or outside where you will know where to find her if she needs to take time for a sensory break or to regulate her emotions. You can also provide a box or kit of sensory calming tools a student can use (Silly Putty, coloring, puzzles).

8. Take care of yourself. One of the most important things to remember. If you work with even just one student who experienced trauma, you can experience vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue. Use your own support system and make time to do things that fill your tank.

How else might you support a student managing the impacts of trauma?

Additional resources for supporting students who have experienced trauma:

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network: <http://www.nctsn.org/> , especially the Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators: <http://www.nctsn.org/resources/audiences/school-personnel/trauma-toolkit>

Massachusetts Advocates for Children's Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative: <http://massadvocates.org/tlpi/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Child Maltreatment information: <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childmaltreatment/index.html>