





TIPS FOR TEACHERS AND CLASSROOM RESOURCES
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Essential Trauma-Informed Teaching Strategies for Managing Stress in the Classroom (and Virtual Classrooms)

By The Editorial Team

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	Kelly Reilly's Transformation Is Seriously Turning Heads		The Tragedy Of Mark Ruffalo Just Gets Sadder And Sadder	
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What is trauma?

According to the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#) (NCTSN), child trauma is when a child witnesses or is involved in an event and, as a result, feels intensely threatened. A traumatic event or situation exceeds an individual's ability to cope. Several types of psychological or physical trauma can lead to extreme distress. Sources of trauma can include (but are not limited to) bullying, natural disasters, and sexual abuse. The [National Survey of Children's Health](#) states that 35 million children in the United States have experienced one or more types of childhood trauma.

One way to consider trauma is as a continuum in frequency and severity, from a single event to multiple events occurring over and over again. The three types of traumas are acute, chronic, and complex. **Acute trauma** occurs as an isolated event, such as a severe accident, medical procedure, or being a victim of a crime. **Chronic trauma** is when stressful or threatening events are experienced repeatedly, such as domestic violence. **Complex trauma** results from multiple and ongoing traumatic events such as abuse or neglect, living with alcoholism or substance abuse, and suffering from financial, food, and/or housing instability.

Impacts of trauma

often because it happens immediately, and she can grasp the reason why the child is distressed.

Chronic and complex trauma can be more challenging to detect in the classroom. A child may appear to be reacting to the situation at hand, but in reality they've been triggered by something else. [Trauma can affect the body and brain](#) in the following ways:

- **Body development:** Trauma can lead to living in a near-constant state of extreme stress or fear. This heightened stress response means the child or adolescent can seemingly overreact emotionally, behaviorally, and/or physically to something that another child may not consider stressful. Children who have been traumatized may also over-respond to stimuli and be extremely sensitive to light and sounds.
- **Brain development:** Trauma often leads to difficulties with language, communication, and processing new information. Reasoning skills are often delayed because of trauma as well.
- **Emotions:** Emotional struggles are common with a trauma history. Children or teens may have difficulties expressing and managing their emotions, quickly exploding and struggling to calm down once upset.
- **Behavior:** Trauma affects the ability to develop healthy attachments and relationships. Distrust, manipulation, argumentative behavior, and impulsivity can be common in youth who have been traumatized.

The trauma-informed approach

The [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration \(SAMHSA\)](#) reports that approximately one in every four children will experience a traumatic event before the age of 16. This means each classroom could have multiple children struggling to deal with various traumas. To create a trauma-sensitive school, where every classroom is safe, healthy, engaging, and challenging for each student, educators must [incorporate a trauma-informed approach](#). This involves first learning about trauma and how it affects children's behaviors, learning, and relationships. Then educators set about intentionally creating an atmosphere that supports each student, demonstrates empathy, and teaches resilience.

What is being trauma-informed?

First and foremost, being trauma-informed means that one has a level of understanding about trauma and its impacts on an individual's brain, body, emotions, and behavior. It is a commitment to learning more about trauma and viewing the individual as a person and not their behavior. Without being trauma-informed, a teacher may misinterpret a child or teen's behavior in the classroom. Being trauma-informed recognizes that the undesirable behaviors are attempts to soothe emotional dysregulation, and this is often done unconsciously on the part of the trauma-impacted individual. It shifts the question from "What is wrong with this child?" to "What has happened to this child?"

Having a trauma-informed lens

A trauma-informed lens is a perspective of how the instructor views the child and the classroom. With a trauma-informed perspective, a teacher can consider alternatives as to why a student might be acting in a certain way, and the teacher can respond in a way that will not cause additional trauma to the child.

Guiding principles of trauma-informed care

SAMHSA released a report containing the six guiding principles of trauma-informed care. Both in-person and virtual classrooms can apply these guiding principles. These principles include:

1. **Safety:** Throughout the school and in each classroom, all people (administration, staff, and students) need to feel physically and psychologically safe.
2. **Trustworthiness and transparency:** Decisions are made and implemented with the primary goal of building and maintaining trust between administration, staff, students, and their families.
3. **Peer support and mutual self-help:** An atmosphere of support is key to building trust and empowerment and in establishing safety.
4. **Collaboration and mutuality:** Everyone—administration, staff, and teachers—has an essential role in developing a trauma-sensitive school. This responsibility is not just for those in therapeutic positions; instead, everyone must do the work to create a trauma-informed workplace.
5. **Empowerment, voice, and choice:** Everyone in the school strives to

...ultimately, empowered students may be asked what they need to feel better. Providing the student an opportunity to use their voice and select what they want or need empowers the child or teen to recognize what they need, express those needs, and feel calm and heard when those needs are met.

6. **Cultural, historical, and gender issues** – Ignoring stereotypes and biases and ensuring that both teaching and other interactions with students and staff are culturally sensitive and responsive is a crucial part of trauma-informed schools.

One must note that these elements of trauma-informed care are not merely a one-time task to be checked off of a list. Instead, a true trauma-informed approach is a series of ongoing, deliberate interactions that put the child as an individual at the forefront and not the exhibited behavior.

Trauma-informed best practices in the classroom

Studies have shown that classrooms can implement several best practices to maximize the support that students need. These evidence-based trauma interventions include:

Recognize the signs of trauma

Signs of trauma in the classroom may include a child having difficulty focusing, struggling with creating and maintaining friendships, being overly tired, and/or having poor self-regulation. Students with excessive absences, changes in their school performance, and withdrawing from activities or others may also be signs that a child has been affected by trauma.

Provide consistency and structure

Daily schedules should be structured and contain elements of academics, entertainment or play, and physical exercise or movement. Also, weaving in aspects of self-regulation skill building such as breathing exercises, mindfulness and journaling can be quite helpful so that students can learn to develop these skills and implement them on their own as needed. Consistency is key to helping a child feel secure.

Providing an overview each day of the schedule and lessons for the day can also reduce anxiety for those children and teens who may become easily distracted, wondering or fearing what might come next. This quick and straightforward task may help return a bit of control to the child as they can mentally prepare for the day.

These tips also apply to virtual classrooms. Consistency and structure can also be provided by setting expectations and goals together as a class, define responsibilities, and regularly checking in with virtual students to see how they are faring.

Utilize social-emotional learning

[Social-emotional learning](#), also called SEL, is the process through which students develop skills in critical areas. These areas include self-awareness, self-control, social awareness, interpersonal skills such as feeling and demonstrating empathy for others, effective listening and communication, and making responsible decisions. SEL skills are critical for student success in school, life, and future work.

Educators can teach these skills in various ways, including modeling behavior, using specially designed SEL curriculum materials, and in their [classroom management practices](#). In addition to specific [counseling activities to teach social-emotional learning](#), these skills can often be introduced in the midst of everyday learning:

- When reading a story to the class, discuss how characters might think or feel.
- Assigning responsibilities and tasks to each student builds a sense of self-worth.
- Starting the day with an affirmation can set the tone for a positive learning environment as it encourages positive self-talk and promotes a growth mindset.
- Teaching mindfulness activities such as breathing can be done in conjunction with "brain breaks" in between lessons.
- Journal exercises help students identify and express their feelings or

Use restorative practices over zero-tolerance policies

Trauma-informed programs realize that zero-tolerance policies are ineffective and harmful. Zero-tolerance policies focus on the offense and are rooted in punishment. The child or teen is punished for committing an infraction with detention, suspension, or expulsion. It removes the student from the classroom environment but does not consider the student as an individual and what might have led to the misbehavior. Zero-tolerance policies disproportionately affect students of color, perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline, and do not provide the support or services the struggling student needs to achieve.

Rather than a single technique or tactic, restorative justice is a paradigm shift in how schools consider discipline and how students who break the rules are perceived and addressed. The goal is to create a new disciplinary system that is highly supportive while also being highly controlled. This system is rooted in respect, healing, empathy, and accountability. Restorative practices seek to do just that – restore relationships and environments. Instead of focusing on punishing the offending student, the focus shifts to repairing relationships between the offending student and the victim or repairing physical damage that may have occurred.

Restorative practices use support systems, including talking circles and peer juries, to create an environment where the student can hear how their actions affected the other party, and the offending student can respond. This approach humanizes both parties and encourages keeping the misbehaving student in the fold rather than excluding them from the school community. It also allows the student to be involved in finding a way to make amends instead of having a punishment doled out upon them. Restorative practices rebuild a traumatized student's relationships with authority figures, reform their belief in fairness, and build their capacity for conducting themselves with integrity.

Research shows that school-wide use of restorative practices has long-term, positive impacts on student behavior, attendance, and achievement. Drop-out and truancy rates decline, and students report being happier while in school. Utilizing this trauma-informed positive behavior support can create an entirely different school environment, especially for students affected by trauma.

Implement a trauma-informed pedagogy

Trauma-informed pedagogy is the practice that keeps trauma and how it affects learners at the forefront when designing and implementing teaching strategies. For instance, during this time of uncertainty and social isolation with the [COVID-19 pandemic](#), educators can recognize that these stressors may compound upon existing trauma and lead to students having a more challenging time completing even basic tasks, being motivated, and engaging with other students.

A [trauma-informed pedagogy](#) also provides content warnings before discussing potentially triggering topics. The educator also prepares themselves in advance on how to respond if a student is triggered. It allows students to opt-out of participating in these discussions and reassures students that they can opt-out without any penalties. Trauma-informed pedagogy also describes and teaches grounding techniques for students who may feel overwhelmed. These types of practices help to create a safe and supportive learning environment for all students.

Teacher self-care while being trauma-informed

In order to create a supportive, trauma-informed classroom, it is imperative that instructors not only identify and deal with their own trauma but also regularly engage in self-care. [Self-care techniques](#) can vary based on the educator's preferences, but examples include exercise, traveling, reading, meditation, yoga, seeing a therapist, and participating in creative or artistic pursuits, such as dancing or painting.

While significant stress that develops as a result of caring for children with a history of trauma. Hearing about various traumas each day can weigh on an educator, resulting in both physical and mental difficulties that can severely interfere with one's life.

Warning signs of secondary traumatic stress include:

- Difficulties sleeping/having nightmares
- Excessive fatigue
- Physical aches and pains
- Lack of motivation and/or decreased productivity
- Difficulties concentrating
- Isolation – avoiding people or activities that once brought joy
- Feelings of anxiety, hopelessness, or anger

Secondary traumatic stress is not a permanent condition. Prioritizing self-care, talking to supportive family, friends, and professionals, and finding healthy outlets to relieve the stress can all help. In time, these difficulties can resolve, allowing for a clear and healthy mindset ready to support and encourage hurting students.

Professional development and training

[Training is necessary](#) in order to develop a trauma-informed classroom. Professional development training is a perfect opportunity to learn about trauma and examine ways to build a supportive environment and trauma-informed communication skills.

Trauma-informed professional development and training topics

Trauma-informed training for teachers can include a variety of topics surrounding trauma, including:

- The different types of trauma
- How trauma affects a child's development
- Ways trauma can manifest in student's actions in the classroom
- How to and how not to respond to undesirable behaviors
- Developing a trauma-sensitive classroom
- Developing a trauma-informed lens and teaching pedagogy
- School-wide techniques and programs that can be implemented to be responsive to both student and staff stress and trauma

For those who want to become even more well-versed in recognizing and managing trauma-based challenging behaviors in the classroom, options exist for both [post-graduate certificates](#) and even a [degree in trauma-informed teaching](#). Spending time learning as much as possible about trauma and how to best support traumatized children in the classroom can have positive and lasting results on both students and the educator.

Resources

[Building a Trauma-Informed, Compassionate Classroom: Strategies & Activities to Reduce Challenging Behavior, Improve Learning Outcomes, and Increase Student Engagement](#) by Jennifer Bashant

[Fostering Resilient Learners: Strategies for Creating a Trauma-Sensitive Classroom](#) – by Kristin Souers and Pete Hall

[Hacking School Discipline: 9 Ways to Create a Culture of Empathy and Responsibility using Restorative Justice](#) – by Nathan Maynard and Brad Weinstein

Berry, M. (2018). Restoring American education: An end to zero-tolerance policies through restorative justice. Retrieved from https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/cap_thes_all/315

Byer, L. (2016). Restorative practices in the school setting: A systematic review. Retrieved from Sophia, the St. Catherine University repository website: https://sophia.stkate.edu/msw_papers/564

SAMSHA. (2014). SAMSHA's concept of trauma and guidance for a trauma-informed approach. Retrieved from <https://youth.gov/feature-article/samshas->

You may also like to read

[Stress Responses: Teaching Resilience for Trauma and Everyday Crises](#)

[This is a Student's Brain on Trauma](#)

[Powerful Resources for Teaching Through Trauma or Tragedy](#)

[Activities for Teaching Tolerance in the Classroom](#)

[Trauma-Informed Strategies to Use in Your Classroom](#)

Tags: Professional Development, Toolkit: Trauma-Informed, Trauma and Resilience

Also of Interest:

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