

# HOW TRAUMA IMPACTS SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Going back to school after the summer often comes with some anxiety and stress, but this year students will likely need a lot more support, reassurance, and comforting before they'll be able to learn. Most children are dealing with some level of trauma after the uncertainty of the past two school years – trauma can occur after anything bad happens that makes the individual feel unsafe or scared. Even families who haven't faced the loss of loved ones, financial stress, or trouble at home have had their sense of safety and security disrupted. This has an especially strong impact on children, as their brains are still developing.

You can help young people move forward despite trauma – use your classroom to create situations in which they have choices, control, and feel empowered.

## PRIORITIZE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SAFETY IN SCHOOLS AND CLASSROOMS

Trauma is really tough on the brain – it's likely that students won't feel like their normal selves. The mind and body have to feel safe to reverse the impact of trauma and feel "normal" again – students can't effectively learn without those basic needs met first. Children often don't have the coping skills needed to handle trauma on their own, so creating this safe environment is crucial to their healing, and thus classroom behavior and learning potential.

Ways you can do this:

- *Be open about your own feelings.* If you're having a bad day, ask if they ever have days when it seems like nothing goes right. Ask for their patience on your off days – it shows them that when one of us is down, the rest can help out and make things easier. It can also encourage them to tell you upfront if they're having a difficult day so you can be prepared to support them.
- *Model empathy and active listening.* Many times, kids just need to feel heard and seen. Don't dismiss their concerns or tell them not to worry – take what they share with you seriously and thank them for being open with you.

## BUILD A STRONG CLASSROOM COMMUNITY.

For students coming in with trauma and anxiety, giving them some control is one of the best things you can do to help them feel more at ease. Many children have gone through similar experiences but felt alone in it, especially given the isolation that came with COVID-19. It's important to help them rebuild social connections and support – peer relationships are crucial for social development. Feeling like part of a classroom team makes school a much more positive environment and holds children accountable to someone other than authority figures.

Ways you can do this:

- *Create a classroom contract together.* Set expectations, rules, and consequences as a group. Discuss what good students, good classmates, and good teachers look like – make sure they know their voices are heard and valued.
- *Be proactive in addressing bullying and disrespectful behavior.* Do this kindly and compassionately, but it's important for kids who may be a victim of bullying to know that you'll be on their side. Part of feeling safe in the classroom is feeling safe in that environment as a whole, not just with the teacher.

## FOCUS ON POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT OVER PUNISHMENT

Many kids feel unheard or like their opinions and desires don't matter, especially after or during a traumatic experience. This often manifests as attention-seeking behaviors. If they get attention - even negative attention - through acting out, they'll likely continue those behaviors. Positive reinforcement is not only more compassionate – it also increases confidence and motivation, both of which are negatively impacted by trauma.

Ways you can do this:

- *Praise appropriate classroom behavior.* Highlighting student role models can motivate and inspire other students. It switches the narrative from "don't do anything wrong" to "let's see how great you can do."
- *Create opportunities for students to show off their strengths to teachers, peers, and themselves.* If a student finishes an independent assignment and didn't have further instructions and starts drawing at their desk without interrupting anyone, don't call out that it's math time – instead, praise their quiet transition and art skills. If you need to redirect them, frame it positively: "I didn't think anyone would finish so quickly! I'd like us to stay focused on math during this time – could you pull out your workbook?"



## WORK WITH THE FAMILY.

You only know so much about your student's home life, especially at the start of a new year. Inviting their family to be a part of the team can help you better understand and support the student with whatever challenges may come up throughout the year. It's helpful to be aware of what your students' families have gone through over the last year and a half (if they're open to sharing) and what resources they have available at home. By making yourself a resource to the parents, they are more likely to be engaged in their child's education, which helps both the student and the teacher.

Ways you can do this:

- *Reach out proactively with positive feedback.* Most families only hear from school when there is negative information to share, like that their child got in trouble or was hurt. Sharing that their child was especially helpful to a student in need or that you were impressed by their book report establishes that you really care about their student.
- *Give families your contact information.* Decide your own boundaries here – maybe you're fine with them having your cell phone number, or maybe you'd rather keep it to email. Tell them when, how, and for what reasons they can or should reach out to you.

## INCREASE YOUR TRAUMA COMPETENCY

Integrating trauma-informed classroom strategies is beneficial to all students, and small changes can make a big difference in student well-being and success.

Ways you can do this:

- *Know your student population.* Different communities experience different types of trauma – know the demographics of your class and educate yourself on what issues different students may face. Understand the cultural differences that show up in coping with trauma and mental health challenges.
- *Connect with local organizations doing on-the-ground work.* There are some things that you can't provide directly to your students and families, but other organizations can – like financial resources or low-cost, healthy food. Know how these issues intersect with youth mental health and student performance and help provide your families with solutions.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCE FOR TEACHERS

WE Teachers, in collaboration with MHA, has developed a free module to give teachers the materials, resources and activities to support your students in identifying and dealing with trauma. You'll learn about what trauma is and how it exists within students and/or the classroom, explore how to identify trauma within a student and discover the importance and benefits of developing a trauma-informed classroom.

Visit [teachershub.we.org/courses/we-teachers-introductory-module-trauma-informed-classroom](https://teachershub.we.org/courses/we-teachers-introductory-module-trauma-informed-classroom) for more information.

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