

Building a Trauma-Sensitive School



Introduction

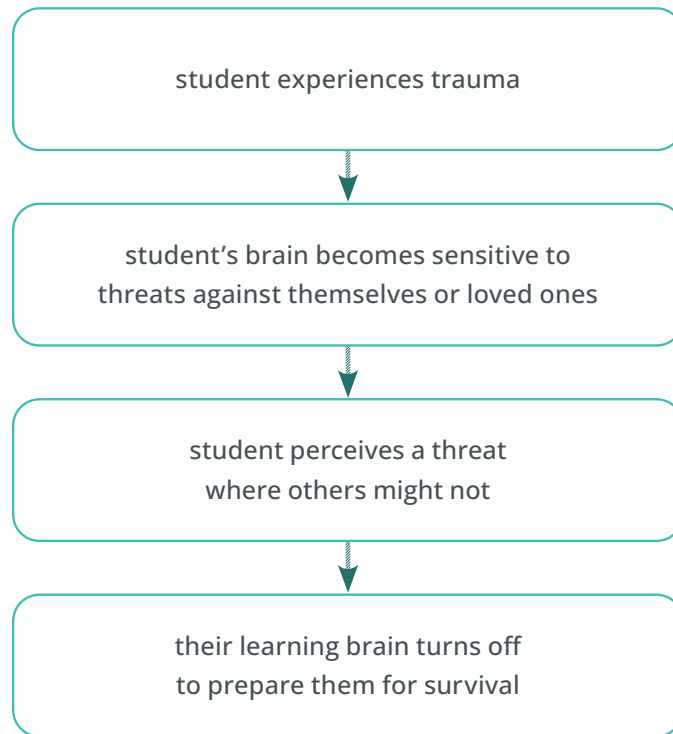
Having a trauma-sensitive approach at school — one that centers safety, regulation, connection, and empowerment — can help students access their learning brain and develop healthy coping skills. Students may have been exposed to trauma through an acute incident, or they may be dealing with ongoing trauma in the form of racist discrimination or other chronic stressors.

Types of Trauma	Examples
Acute <i>exposure to a single, isolated traumatic incident</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• accident• natural disaster• sudden loss• single act of violence
Chronic <i>repeated or prolonged traumatic experiences</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• ongoing bullying• long-term illness• poverty• war
Complex <i>exposure to multiple traumatic events from an early age, often without the necessary support, leading to impacts in many areas</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• experiencing abuse within the family• witnessing abuse within the family• neglect by caregivers• other ongoing experiences with violence without support
Racial <i>cumulative trauma due to racism experienced by a group across generations and in the present</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• racism• discrimination• harassment• economic, physical, and emotional impacts of generational disenfranchisement.

Adapted from the National Center of Safe Supportive Learning Environments

Background

When a student experiences trauma, they fear that serious harm can come to them or someone they love and their survival reflex, the fight or flight response, kicks in. This survival response turns off the learning part of the brain so that the student can focus on scanning the environment for threats and preparing to react quickly.



This can be life-saving in a traumatic event, but outside of the traumatic environment students exposed to trauma can continue to have their survival reflex triggered. They might sense threats to their safety when others don't or have intrusive reminders of their trauma trigger their survival response.

When triggered, students tend to resort back to behaviors that helped them survive their trauma but may be unhelpful or inappropriate outside of that traumatic environment. These behaviors can function like reflexes, and some are ingrained over years of chronic stress and adverse experiences that strengthen neural pathways focused on survival.

How likely a student is to adopt healthy behaviors and ways of coping is influenced by how often they experience what they lacked in their trauma: feeling safe, regulated, connected, and empowered.

For schools to be trauma-sensitive, every staff member needs to invest in understanding the range of adverse experiences and supporting student resilience. Trauma-sensitive approaches aim to directly address the impact of adverse experiences, so students have the best chance possible to be successful.



Safety

A key part of what makes an experience traumatic is a lack of safety. Students exposed to adverse experiences can struggle to feel safe and to know when they are safe.

Early signs a student might be struggling with their sense of safety include increased sensitivity to their environment.

Students struggling with their sense of safety may:

- easily become afraid or nervous
- consistently look around and scan the room
- react quickly to sounds and movements
- believe something is potentially targeted toward them that others don't
- view a situation as more dangerous than others involved
- struggle to manage anxious energy, resulting in tapping, bouncing their leg, or being jumpy
- be sensitive to others being in their personal space or looking at them

Understanding what environmental factors contribute to trauma related triggers is also important. This can include less structured parts of the day, like arrival and dismissal, loud, chaotic, or crowded environments in which students lack personal space, like the cafeteria or gym, or areas with less staff presence and supervision, like bathrooms, hallways, and locker rooms.

To promote a sense of safety, try:

- greeting students by name with the goal of making them feel welcome in their school
- interacting with students with a respectful tone while being aware of volume and personal space
- enforcing school norms by addressing student behaviors swiftly, calmly, and when possible, on an individual level
- facilitating routines and schedules
- problem-solving with students experiencing changes or disruptions in their day
- ensuring classroom spaces are inviting, free of clutter, and easily navigated



Regulation

Adverse experiences can make students vulnerable to dysregulation when they experience involuntary reactions in which their brains react to non-threatening events as though their trauma is occurring in that very moment.

Helping students use skills to regulate and access support is key to them learning how to manage these false alarms and have a better sense of when they feel safe.

Students struggling to regulate may:

- be sensitive to personal space and physical touch
- become irrational or difficult to connect with
- struggle to stay oriented to where they are and what is happening
- seem more on edge or jumpy
- be overwhelmed by emotion leading them to yell, cry, argue, or throw things
- seem ready to engage in conflict
- go to extremes to avoid certain situations or people or shut down all together

Being aware of the types of plans put in place in your school for students that struggle to regulate can help guide interventions. Noticing if a student is able to respond appropriately when spoken to or if they seem continually on edge can inform the approach. Peak dysregulation often lasts only minutes. But, once dysregulated, students can be easily triggered and have their stress spike again, even if they seem calm.

Providing students with a quiet place to regulate and meet their basic needs can help decrease the likeliness a student is triggered again. Sometimes the key to communicating with students in distress is reading body language and knowing when to give the student a moment and when to communicate simple, clear messages.

Some key strategies to support students' regulation include:

- taking a deep breath before engaging with the student
- providing personal space
- using a calm tone, simple language, and focusing on one thing at a time
- providing clear options
- encouraging and reminding students to use regulation skills, like breathing
- joining the student in using regulation skills
- helping the student relocate to a quiet, calm area



Connection

When it comes to connection, many students with adverse experiences struggle with trust and may feel like others won't understand them or don't have the ability to make a positive impact on their life.

Students struggling to feel connected may:

- struggle to believe what others say
- doubt others want what is best for them
- feel that no one can provide the care and protection they need
- assume others have ulterior motives and can switch from being kind to hurtful at any moment

Helping students use skills to regulate and access support is key to them learning how to manage these false alarms and have a better sense of when they feel safe. Avoiding relationships is often a result of students struggling to trust others.

To help students experience connection, try:

- acknowledging students by name
- being approachable and consistent and being aware of your body language
- reminding students regularly that you are there to help
- responding to students with respect
- seeking to get to know students for who they are and what they care about
- modeling social skills to students, like how to communicate effectively
- inviting student input into their learning and behavior problem-solving
- helping students connect with one another, like pointing out shared interests or facilitating conversation



Empowerment

Trauma often involves a loss of control. Part of the goal as school staff is to help students experience a sense of control by putting them in positions to influence school culture and decision-making.

Students lacking empowerment may:

- avoid making decisions, sharing their opinions or participating, even in games
- be hesitant to volunteer or accept responsibilities
- allow others to speak for them
- doubt their ability to maintain their safety or protect others
- feel inadequate or unable to influence what happens to them going forward

Empowering students can involve enlisting their help and designating responsibilities or jobs. Finding platforms for student voices to influence decisions, even small ones, can help students feel heard and validate their ability to contribute.

If part of your role is responding to escalations in student behavior, understand that when staff exert control on a situation through intimidation or physical intervention, it increases the likelihood that a student feels powerless and is reminded of their trauma.

To help empower students, try:

- enlisting students' help and designating responsibilities
- finding platforms for student voices to influence decisions at school
- identifying students' strengths and finding opportunities for them to demonstrate those strengths
- being mindful of volume and tone to promote respectful communication
- embracing project-based learning that provides opportunities for students to take on leadership roles
- supporting students' decision-making processes by asking questions and exploring options

Conclusion

All students benefit significantly from safety and stability. When staff support students in feeling regulated and connected, students are better able to engage in healthy behaviors. Empowering students guides them to invest in themselves, their relationships, and the school environment.