

Creating Trauma-Informed Classrooms: Strategies to Support Student Learning and Regulation

Trauma can activate a “survival mode” in which the brain prioritizes safety rather than learning. Consistent, structured, and supportive environments can help regulate this response and improve students’ ability to access learning.

RELATIONSHIP

Supportive relationships are a foundational component of healing.

- **Form Connections:** Actively say hi, use first names, and demonstrate interest in their lives. Greater trust leads to safer feelings, which allows for better focus.
- **Daily Connection:** Set aside a few minutes regularly to talk with a student about anything unrelated to school. Consistent, low-pressure conversation builds trust over time.
- **Calm & Attuned:** Maintain a regulated, quiet presence. Monitor non-verbal cues (pacing, staring, or irritability) that indicate a student is being triggered.
- **Predictable routines:** Consistent routines and predictable classroom structures help students who have experienced trauma feel safe, reduce anxiety, and support emotional regulation, which improves their ability to engage in learning.
- **Check Assumptions & Be Curious:** When behavior changes, observe and respond with curiosity rather than judgment. Use neutral, non-blaming language (e.g., “Help me understand what happened” or “What was going on for you?”).
- **Don’t Personalize:** Recognize that behaviors such as outbursts or defiance may be linked to stress or trauma responses (e.g., fight, flight, or freeze) rather than intentional disrespect.
- **The Power of Calm:** Calm, regulated presence helps students feel safe and ready to learn.

ACADEMIC

Structure and predictability reduce cognitive load and enable learning.

- **Student Reflection:** Ask students to identify and share on what supports or hinders their learning
- **Regulate → Relate → Reason:** When students are dysregulated, first support regulation, then build connection, and only then engage in problem-solving and reflection.
- Give a **small number of directions** at once.
- Provide written or visual **models** of what the finished task should look like.
- **Break work into shorter**, manageable segments (e.g., 10–15 minutes).
- Providing **predictable and manageable levels of challenge** can support students’ regulation and engagement over time.
- **Give students control** over small decisions (e.g., which task to start first). This helps restore a sense of safety.
- Avoid calling on students when they have not been given an opportunity to prepare to present.
- **Low-Profile Communication:** Use post-it notes for silent check-ins. Leave a note for a “status check” or a private question to provide support without the social pressure of “calling out” the student.
- Present information in multiple ways (e.g., visual, verbal, and hands-on) to support understanding, engagement, and access for all students.
- Identify the specific skill needing support and provide clear guidance on how it can improve.

CLASSROOM & SAFETY

The environment should promote a sense of safety, which supports regulation and learning.

- **Designated Safe Spaces:** Provide designated spaces in or near the classroom where students can go to calm and regulate when experiencing stress or distress.
- **Sensory Strategies:** Use physical tools to help students manage sensory input.
 - Touch: Stress balls, clay, bean bags, fidgets, hula hoop to identify personal space
 - Smell: Provide "scent jars" or scented dough
 - Hearing: noise cancellation headphones, nature sounds, music
 - Visual: Looking at nature, watching clouds, "I Spy" games, puzzle, create patterns, hidden picture books
- **Movement and Calming Breaks:** Provide opportunities for both physical movement and quiet regulation activities to support attention and engagement.
 - Younger students:
 - Movement: animal walks, action songs, simple yoga or stretching, movement games
 - Calming: coloring or simple mandalas, easy origami, drawing, guided breathing (e.g., smell the flower, blow the candle), sensory support (e.g., rocking chair, wiggle seat)
 - Older students:
 - Movement: short walks, stretching, yoga or mindful movement, student-selected movement options
 - Calming: journaling, doodling or zentangle patterns, listening to calm music with headphones, coloring
- **Be aware of sensitivity to Triggers:** Environmental cues (e.g., loud noises, weather, or anniversaries) can trigger stress responses in students with trauma and affect behavior and regulation.
- **Strategic Seating:** Allow students to sit where they feel safest (e.g., back to the wall, near an exit, or away from loud noises/windows).
- **Transition Warnings:** Offer consistent advance warnings before transitions so students can mentally prepare and adjust more smoothly.
- **Reduce shaming and blaming** by eliminating public methods of noting performance, such as clip charts.

BEHAVIOR & REGULATION

Regulation precedes reasoning. Listen, attune, then respond

- **Listen carefully before responding** to challenging behavior. Sometimes silence is the best response.
- **Regulate → Relate → Reason:** When students are dysregulated, first support regulation, then build connection, and only then engage in problem-solving and reflection.
- **Low & Slow Response:** Use a calm tone, simple and brief language, and a steady pace of speech and movement to reduce escalation and support regulation.
- **Post-Calm Conversation:** Wait until the student is regulated before discussing the situation. Once calm, support the student in identifying triggers and planning strategies for future situations. Avoid problem-solving while the student is still dysregulated.
- **Name Emotions:** Help students recognize and label their emotions, while acknowledging and validating their experiences to support self-awareness and emotional regulation.
- **Rhythmic Regulation:** Use rhythmic, repetitive activities (e.g., clapping or tapping) to regulate the stress response and ground students in the present moment.
- **Logical Consequences:** Establish clear and consistent behavioral expectations and implement logical, non-punitive consequences that are directly related to the behavior.
- **Introduce Gradually:** Get to know each student and explore a range of strategies. Start slowly, observe individual responses, and avoid pushing approaches that students find uncomfortable.
- Use a collaborative problem-solving approach to address behavior:
 - **Empathize:** Understand the student's perspective and concerns
 - **Define Concerns:** Share the adult's concerns clearly
 - **Collaborate:** Work together to identify and agree on a solution