



Trauma-Informed Classrooms:

What Can Teachers Do?

Here are some classic symptoms of exposure to trauma, and it is safe to assume if a student is in foster care trauma occurred.

Impulsivity-----Memory and focus issues-----Hypersensitivity to stimulation-----Emotional reactivity

Along with referring children to the appropriate school and community resources, such as counseling, social services, etc., there are many things teachers can do to assist these students in the classroom, such as:

- **Learn about the effects of trauma so that you can spot trauma symptoms when you see them.** Understand that a trauma trigger—something that reminds the child of a traumatic event—may send that child into a fight, flight, or freeze response (aggression, running away, or withdrawing). When a child seems to be having a difficult time, ask, “*What’s happening for this child?*” rather than “*What is wrong with this child?*” This simple mental switch may help you realize that the child has been triggered into a fear response.
- **Make a meaningful connection with the child.** Children heal in the presence of relationship. An important part of working with students with trauma history is just showing up and being there no matter what.
- **Focus on children’s positive behaviors and efforts, and offer specific praise whenever you can.** Connect before you redirect. What you focus on, you will get more of.
- **Provide structure and predictability** – As much as possible, maintain a predictable routine and schedule. Write the day’s agenda on the board and structure transition times. Give a heads-up before loud noises like a fire drill or lights going out for a video.
- **Understand that children who have experienced trauma may be younger *developmentally* than they are *chronologically*.** (While you wouldn’t be surprised by a tantrum from a 3-year old, you might be surprised by that same behavior in an eight year-old. But *developmentally*, this eight year-old might be more like three.) It may help to *think younger*.
- **Find out what the child needs to feel safe, both physically and emotionally.** This might be:
 - A special place they can go when they’re feeling overwhelmed (for example, a peace corner in the classroom)
 - A signal you develop with the child to let you know when they’re feeling overwhelmed
 - A technique that you teach them for self-calming
- **Create opportunities for children to make choices.** This helps them develop a sense of control and overcome the chronic feelings of powerlessness that can result from experiencing trauma and violence.
- **Model, teach, and practice self-regulation with children.** Breathing techniques, stretching or other moving exercises, and sensory calming tools (such as silly putty, stress balls, chew tips for pencils) can help children learn to calm themselves.
- **Help children cultivate their strengths and interests in both academic and nonacademic arenas** (such as martial arts, drama, athletics, music) to help them cultivate a sense of self-confidence and mastery.
- **Respect the child’s confidentiality.** Share information about the child’s status only with appropriate people and only when necessary. And always remember your role as a mandated reporter.



References and Resources:

Trauma-Informed Education

- ❖ Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University- www.developingchild.harvard.edu
- ❖ Massachusetts Advocates for Children *Helping Traumatized Children Learn*-
www.traumasensitiveschools.org
- ❖ National Child Traumatic Stress Network- www.Nctsn.org
- ❖ Community Resilience Initiative- www.resiliencetrumpsaces.org
- ❖ ACEs Connection Network- www.acesconnection.com
- ❖ Trauma Transformed- www.traumatransformed.org
- ❖ Changing Minds Now- www.changingmindsnow.org
- ❖ Echo Parenting- www.echoparenting.org/resources
- ❖ ACEs Too High- www.acestoohigh.com



Working with children who have experienced trauma can be difficult. It may bring up frustrations, grief and loss issues, fears, and other strong emotions, or it may trigger a teacher's own trauma issues. Getting help and support around the challenges of working in the classroom is important for anyone who works with children who have experienced trauma.



Lastly, Trauma can be defined as both "Capital T Trauma" and "lower case t trauma" (complex and/or developmental trauma). Big T Trauma usually means large, and sometimes, singular life threatening events or witnessing extreme circumstances; Often the type of event associated with traditional PTSD. Small t trauma can be an accumulation of experience over long periods of time in distressful or neglectful contexts or family systems (read poverty, lack of an adequate care-giver, emotionally abusive environment, etc.). Either type of childhood experiences can lead to the same symptoms and need for increased sensitivity and safety.

Brought to you by the Santa Cruz County Office of Education and the Foster Youth Services Coordinating Program (FYSCP) in Collaboration with Partners from The FYSCP Executive Advisory Council – Particularly Santa Cruz County Children's Mental Health and Cabrillo College's Foster and Kinship Care Education Program. Contact Michael Paynter at 831-466-5729 with any questions.