



School and Classroom Strategies: Trauma Related Concerns

This Quick Fact Sheet contains strategies designed to address potential symptoms of student trauma and should be used in consultation and collaboration with your school's mental health personnel or as part of a larger intervention approach. These pages contain only a portion of many possible strategies available to address symptoms of trauma in the classroom. Strategies should always be individualized and implemented with careful consideration of the differences of each child and the context of their individual circumstances. Additionally, this information should never be used to formulate a diagnosis. Mental health diagnoses should be made only by a trained mental health professional after a thorough evaluation.

If you notice a significant change in mood in any student that lasts for more than a week, share your observations with the child's parent and/or guardian and with your school's mental health support team.

General Strategies for Students Impacted by Trauma

Because of the large number of our students who have been exposed to trauma, schools must integrate school wide "trauma-sensitive" approaches to teaching. Critical to a school's success in educating students impacted by trauma is the establishment of safe, supportive, and stable school environments and classrooms to which traumatized students feel connected. The relationship between a student and his or her teacher is a central factor in how traumatized students function in school. In order to learn, students with post trauma stress must feel that their caregiver (in this case their teacher or other school staff with whom students spend significant amounts of time) can be trusted to keep them emotionally and physically safe during their school day.

Strategies for Attachment and Other Social Difficulties

- Get to know the student well and work hard to form a positive and trusting relationship with them; stay attuned to the student's emotional state—cues may be subtle
- Trusting relationship may be more easily formed when the student knows what to expect from you; be consistent in your responses to the student and integrate routines and rituals throughout the school day
- Be understanding of a student's need for "space," but encourage participation in social activities, clubs, and/or athletics that the student may have previously participated in or may have talent in
- Give the student opportunities to help their peers in areas in which they excel

Strategies for Difficulty with Emotional Perception and Regulation

- Help the student learn to identify their feelings by reflecting the feelings back to them; show the student you are listening and validate what you hear them saying
- Help the student learn how to modulate their emotions by modeling healthy self-regulation; stay in control of your own feelings
- Assist the student in learning and practicing relaxation techniques such as breathing exercises and muscle relaxation
- Allow the student to use manipulatives such as a stress ball or worry stone in class
- Teach the student appropriate and effective ways to communicate and express feelings

Strategies for Building a Sense of Competency

- Maintain realistic academic standards while staying attuned to the student so that you do not "push" them into a "fight or flight" response
- Provide a lot of opportunity for *meaningful* participation in the school community
- Identify and cultivate the student's strengths, talents, and interests and tailor the student's learning to these
- Provide a lot of encouragement; point out the student's accomplishments and successes



Strategies for Impaired Executive Functioning

- Provide the student with written copies of class notes and/or assignments
- Provide the student with an extra set of books to keep at home
- Help the student organize projects and break down assignments into manageable parts
- Allow flexible deadlines for work completion; shorten assignments if necessary
- Incorporate multiple ways to present information when teaching; use graphic organizers and physical manipulatives where possible
- Prompt the student throughout the day to use a day planner to keep track of assignments; provide support at the end of each day to make sure the student has all assignments documented and all necessary materials
- Allow the student more time to respond when asking questions or making requests
- Provide predictability; post the daily schedule where it can be easily seen and review it frequently; take the time to make written changes when there is a change in the day's plans

Strategies for Trauma Related Distress

- Provide simple and honest answers to the student's questions about traumatic events while clarifying distortions and misconceptions
- Allow the student to talk about or act out the trauma and listen actively
- If the student wants to talk about or process the trauma at a time that is inappropriate or impossible, provide them with a concrete alternative ("I will talk with you about this at 10:20 when we have snack" or "the counselor will be here at lunch time and you can talk with him then")
- Avoid being "pulled into" playing a role that re-traumatizes the student (i.e. student may act out trauma in a way that makes you want to yell)
- Establish a classroom culture characterized by safety and acceptance; implement effective anti-bullying programs and approaches
- Provide consistent routine wherever possible; anticipate difficult times (i.e. anniversaries, transitions) and provide preventive supports
- Provide the student with opportunities for "self time out" to regroup when they are feeling overwhelmed
- Provide built-in opportunities for the student to talk with a supportive adult who has the time and ability to listen attentively
- Validate the student's experience and feelings; resist the urge to downplay what they tell you in an effort to help them "get over it"
- Be sensitive to cues in the environment that may be triggers for trauma related anxiety and avoid any unnecessary exposure to these potential triggers

Strategies for Behavior Problems

- Develop a school wide, coordinated behavior support and management system that emphasizes positive behavioral supports
- Be clear about expected behaviors; teach rules and expected behaviors explicitly
- Model respectful, non-violent behavior and relationships
- Set clear limits for inappropriate behavior and implement logical (not punitive) consequences
- Address behavioral issues before they are out of control
- If behavior is a consistent problem, conduct a functional behavior assessment to determine behavioral triggers and develop a behavior intervention plan
- Provide the student with many genuine choices to increase sense of self-efficacy and self-control

Important Note for Teachers: The National Child Traumatic Stress Network suggests that you seek support and consultation routinely for yourself in order to prevent "compassion fatigue," also referred to as "secondary traumatic stress." Be aware that you can develop compassion fatigue from exposure to trauma through the children with whom you work.