

Supporting Trauma-Exposed Students

Resource Bundle



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Behavioral Supports

Strategy	Suggestions & Examples
Create a sense of predictability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Establish clear and consistent classroom routines.• Preview and discuss changes or deviations to the routine (e.g. a fire drill, an assembly, a substitute teacher)• Create a daily schedule and communicate it to students
Learn about the student's triggers ¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• If possible, remove reminders of the trauma from the learning environment or limit the child's exposure to them.• Anticipate situations that may be difficult for the child, preview them, and provide support.<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ <i>Example: If the class is going to be reading a text that deals with a topic related to the traumatic experience, meet with the child ahead of time. Ask what can be done to help make him/her more comfortable, or offer an alternative activity.</i>
Provide accommodations for a student experiencing strong emotions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide a safe space in the school or classroom where a child can go to self-soothe if he or she is experiencing strong emotion.• Work to identify strategies (e.g. breathing exercises, stretching, physical activity) that can help de-escalate the child from high states of arousal.
Work with students to identify and process feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Acknowledge the emotion<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ <i>Example: "When ___ happened, you seemed angry/upset/sad."</i>• Ask open-ended, non-judgmental questions<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ <i>Example: "What were you feeling?" "What do you think it is about ___ that makes you feel ___?"</i>• Validate the child's <i>feelings</i> even if his or her <i>behavior</i> was problematic²<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ <i>Example: "You were upset because John touched your backpack without asking. Let's talk about ways you could have handled this other than hitting him."</i>
Provide opportunities for students to make choices	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Choices might include things like:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Which activity to do○ Where to sit○ Which group to work with
Work with colleagues and administrators to create a coordinated behavior management plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use a uniform (school-wide) set of rules that are in effect everywhere (e.g. all classrooms, the lunchroom, the hallway, etc.).• Teach students about the rules and the benefits of following them.• Set firm limits on inappropriate behavior, and use logical consequences³.• Ensure that all school staff is able to recognize and respond to instances of bullying, harassment, or intolerance.

¹ Triggers are *reminders* of a traumatic event, not traumatic events themselves. Triggers may include people, places, things, sounds, images, words, dates (e.g. anniversaries).

² For traumatized students (and really, for all students), one must respond to the emotion beneath a behavior rather than just the behavior itself.

³ A consequence is "logical" if it is aligned to the misbehavior and directly addresses its cause. Consequences are different from punishments, which are usually disconnected from the behavior and designed to cause (some amount of) pain or embarrassment to the student.

Academic Supports

Strategy	Explanation / Illustration
Maintain high academic standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not lower the level of academic rigor to make work easier for students. • Be honest with students about what learning gaps they may have and develop a plan to address them.
Teach literacy and language skills to aid self-expression	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach vocabulary and writing skills that give students tools to express themselves. • Give students the opportunity to engage in narrative, biographical writing. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Example: A writing activity in which students must identify three or more key moments in their lives, and describe their significance. An assignment like this creates space for, but does not force, students to share traumatic experiences.</i> • Use language-rich activities that build classroom community. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Example: Many multicultural educators describe an activity called “We Are Each of Many Groups.” In the activity, students list the parts of their identity that feel most important to them (e.g. ethnicity, religion, interests, languages, etc.), discuss their lists in pairs or small groups, and ask one another questions.</i>
Identify and focus on strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn about what students are interested in and enjoy doing. • Try, whenever possible, to link a new learning activity to an existing interest or strength⁴.
Present information verbally and non-verbally	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present directions or expectations in multiple forms (e.g. verbal, written, visual). • Check for understanding and have students repeat directions before beginning a task. • Use role-plays to clarify expectations and generate student questions.
Make your curriculum sensitive and responsive to trauma ⁵	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a classroom community in which all students feel safe and affirmed in their identities. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Work with students to create norms centered on empathy and mutual respect.</i> ○ <i>Teach students empathy-building skills such as suspending judgment, and asking questions to understand.</i> • Foster an environment of democratic participation (especially in class discussions) in which students feel comfortable sharing their perspectives. • Create space to discuss and explore trauma-related or sensitive topics. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Examples: Domestic or community violence, suicide, natural disaster, sexual abuse.</i> ○ <i>Position students to pose questions, analyze, and build new understandings.</i> • See these resources: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “Shelter from the Storm” (Teaching Tolerance): article & toolkit ○ “When Bad Things Happen” (Teaching Tolerance)

⁴ For much more detailed information on how to do this, see the modules entitled: *Preparing to Differentiate: Student Interest* and *Affirming Difference & Valuing Background Knowledge*.

⁵ When thinking about incorporating trauma-related topics, texts, and discussions into the curriculum, consideration must be given to the age and developmental levels of your students. Even for very young children, however, there are excellent picture books that teachers can use to engage in discussions of sensitive topics in a careful and sensitive way.

Children's Literature and Trauma: A Book List

Supplement [\(Back to Table of Contents\)](#)

All of the books on this list deal with themes of trauma and loss. They can be used to help students discuss trauma-related topics in a safe, non-threatening, and academic context.

Picture Books

My Yellow Balloon by Tiffany Papageorge

Tear Soup: A Recipe for Healing After Loss by Pat Schwiebert and Chuck DeKlyen

When Dinosaurs Die: A Guide to Understanding Death by Laura Krasny Brown

A Terrible Thing Happened by Margaret Holmes and Sasha Mudlaff

Healing Days: A Guide for Kids Who Have Experienced Trauma by Susan Farber Straus

Whimsy's Heavy Things by Julie Kralis

Jenny is Scared: When Sad Things Happen in the World by Carol Shulman

Sometimes I'm Scared by Jane Annunziata

Why Are You So Sad: A Child's Book About Parental Depression by Beth Andrews and Nicole Wong

Young Adult Novels

Please Ignore Vera Dietz by A.S. King

Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe by Benjamin Alire Sáenz

The Rules of Survival by Nancy Werlin

Bronxwood by Coe Booth

Thirteen Reasons Why by Jay Asher

I'll Give You the Sun by Jandy Nelson

The Thing About Jellyfish by Ali Benjamin

Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson

Looking for Alaska by John Green

London Reign by A.C. Britt

Hold Still by Nina LaCour

Panic by Sharon Draper

Faking Normal by Courtney Stevens

Strategy: Teach literacy skills

Why it's Effective
Literacy and language skills can help traumatized children make sense of their experiences and manage their emotions.
Suggestions & Examples
<p>Teach language skills focused on self-expression.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Model how to use words to describe feelings and emotions.<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ <i>This made me angry because...</i>○ <i>It was hard for me when ___ because ___...</i>• Provide sentence frames that show cause/effect relationships or help students explain their thinking.<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ <i>I think/believe/feel ___ because...</i>○ <i>One reason for ___ is ___...</i>• Check out this resource on helping children identify and express emotions published by the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations of Early Learning at Vanderbilt University. <p>Provide/create opportunities for autobiographical writing.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Example: A writing activity in which students must identify three or more key moments from their lives and describe their significance. An assignment like this creates space for, but does not force, students to share traumatic experiences. <p>Use language-rich activities that build community.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Example: “We Are Each of Many Groups” (Schniedewind & Davidson, 2014). In this activity, students list the parts of their identities that feel most important to them (e.g. ethnicity, religion, interests, languages, etc.), discuss their lists in pairs or small groups, and ask one another questions. Activities like this give students a chance to share or disclose things about themselves in a safe way.

Strategy: Identify and focus on strengths

Why it's Effective
Focusing on strengths helps traumatized children (re)build self-esteem and self-efficacy.
Suggestions & Examples
<p>Learn about what the student is interested in and good at.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Example: Through conversations and informal interactions, a teacher learns that a trauma-exposed student is a skilled athlete and enjoys physical activity. <p>Link new learning to an existing interest or strength.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Example: The teacher allows the student to read about his favorite sport during reading time and use it as a topic for writing assignments. She gives him classroom jobs that allow him to leave his seat and move around (e.g. passing out papers). She attends his games after school. <p>Give authentic praise.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Praise should be descriptive, focus on process and effort, and give specific feedback on what a student did well (Gable et al., 2009)<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ <i>Example: "Wow, you worked really hard on this essay. It was difficult, but you stuck with it and used the techniques we learned in class. Your effort really paid off."</i>○ <i>Non-example: "Good job!"</i>

Strategy: Present information verbally and nonverbally

Why it's Effective
Presenting information in multiple forms provides an accommodation for traumatized students who have difficulty attending to verbal directions due to hyperarousal. It's also just good teaching practice.
Suggestions & Examples
<p>Give directions in multiple forms.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Example: A teacher delivers directions verbally, posts them on the board, and provides a visible "exemplar" illustrating what students are supposed to do. <p>Check for understanding before cueing students to begin.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Example: A teacher asks students to repeat instructions or verbalize their understanding before beginning a task. <p>Use role-plays to clarify expectations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Example: A teacher calls upon students to model or act out the directions or procedure for a task or activity before cueing the rest of the class to begin.

Strategy: Make your curriculum sensitive and responsive to trauma

Why it's Effective

Addressing trauma-related topics through the curriculum can de-stigmatize them, and allow students to give voice to (and take ownership of) their experiences.

Suggestions & Examples

Create a community in which all students feel safe and affirmed.

- Work with students to create class norms centered on empathy and mutual respect. Sample norms:
 - *Every person in this room deserves to feel safe and valued at all times.*
 - *No one should be made to feel bad or ashamed about a part of who they are.*
 - *Consider how your words will affect other people in the room.*
 - *Seek to understand the points of view of others.*
 - *Don't make assumptions about what other people think/feel/believe.*
 - *Speak your own truth, but don't speak on behalf of others.*
- Teach students empathy-building skills such as suspending judgment and asking questions to understand. Establish the norm that

Foster an environment of democratic participation.

- Ask authentic and open-ended questions and invite multiple students to respond.
 - *What do you think about...?*
 - *What in your experience has led you to think/believe that?*
 - *Would it be different if...?*
- Teach students how to respond to one another directly, and agree or disagree respectfully.
 - *I hear what you're saying, but I disagree because...*

Create space to discuss and explore trauma-related topics.

- Examples: Domestic or community violence, suicide, natural disaster, sexual abuse. Position students to pose questions and analyze these topics. See the [Truth 'N Trauma Project](#) at Chicago State University.

Use existing resources.

- Examples: "[Shelter from the Storm](#)" and "[When Bad Things Happen](#)" are both free resources published by Teaching Tolerance that can help teachers address trauma-related topics. A variety of excellent picture books can also help teachers approach trauma-related issues in a careful and sensitive way.

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