

HOW TRAUMA IMPACTS SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Trauma is an emotional response to a distressing or disturbing event that overwhelms the individual's ability to cope. Trauma is subjective – a traumatic experience for one person may not be traumatic for another, but that does not mean it is any less real for the person who is traumatized.

People of all ages experience trauma, but it has a particularly long-lasting impact on children as their brains are still rapidly developing. Often, children and adolescents don't have the necessary coping skills to manage the impact of stressful events on their own or the language to explain their feelings (or even what happened).

WHAT DOES TRAUMA LOOK LIKE IN THE CLASSROOM?

There's no one way for children and teens to respond to trauma, but here are some signs to look out for:

- Excessive anger or irritability
- Unusual startle reactions
- Significantly increased or reduced appetite
- Exhaustion
- Aggression (physical or verbal)
- Regular tardiness/absence from class
- Perfectionist or controlling behavior
- Difficulty concentrating
- Frequent headaches or stomachaches
- Low self-confidence
- Hoarding (snacks, school supplies)
- Risky behavior (substance use, sex)
- Panic attacks
- Extreme self-reliance or hyper-independence
- Running away
- Defiance
- Alienation from peers (self-isolation or inability to relate/make friends)

It's important to keep in mind that trauma responses can vary by culture, race, gender, geographic location, and other factors – and students have all had different traumatic experiences over the last year. Many students and families may have dealt with vaccine anxiety, but likely not as intensely as Black Americans who thought back to the Tuskegee Study. In terms of trauma response behaviors, girls are more likely to turn inward and get quiet or retreat from social settings, while boys are more likely to get outwardly irritable or disrupt class. All behavior is a form of communication – if a student's actions or demeanor are disruptive or strike you as "off," think about it from a trauma lens and consider what they might be trying to express as needs or wants.

Social-emotional Development: Experiencing trauma, especially at a young age, disrupts young people's ability to relate to others and manage emotions. Without healthy coping skills, this often leads to poor in-class behavior, which can reduce learning time and increase rates of suspension and expulsion.

Academic Performance: Trauma can undermine many skills that are crucial for learning, including development of language and communication skills, the ability to organize and remember new information, and reading comprehension. Students coping with trauma may experience intrusive thoughts or flashbacks that prevent them from paying attention in class, studying, or focusing during timed assignments. School-related trauma (like bullying or unfair punishment) often leads to school avoidance, leaving the most vulnerable students behind academically. Trauma also negatively impacts young people's sense of self, making it difficult for those students to feel motivated, proud, and engaged in their learning.

If you notice these symptoms in a child or teen, you may want to consider or encourage a mental health screening. A screening is a free, anonymous, and confidential way to see if a person is showing signs of a mental health condition. Screening tools for young people and parents are available at [MHAScreening.org](https://www.mhaindianriver.org/Screening). Once completed, screeners are given information about the next steps to take based on results.

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TYPES OF TRAUMA

It can be helpful to think about "big 'T' Trauma" and "little 't' trauma." Big 'T' Trauma is what most people think of when it comes to traumatic events – things like physical abuse or the sudden death of a parent. Little 't' trauma refers to events that may not be as obviously traumatic but can still be too much for a child's brain to process – things like parents fighting a lot at home or struggling to connect with peers.

Here are some issues that students may be struggling with this school year:

COVID-19:

The fear, uncertainty, and general upheaval that the pandemic caused has been (and continues to be) traumatic for many. Many youth are dealing with significant grief – over 1.5 million children have lost a primary or secondary caregiver due to COVID-19.¹ Rates of substance use² and family violence/abuse³ have increased during the pandemic, and even just heightened anger and arguing in the home can be traumatic.

RACIAL INJUSTICE:

In the U.S., Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) students are vulnerable to racial trauma due to living in a system of white supremacy. Race-based discrimination and violence have been prominent in media coverage, which can be triggering and retraumatizing for students with marginalized identities.

SCHOOL FEARS:

The start of a new school year is often particularly challenging for students who have faced bullying or exclusion among their peers. A number of students may be dealing with severe separation anxiety after having spent more time at home recently, or if they saw less of their parent(s) during the pandemic due to essential work and fear that happening again.

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HOW TRAUMA IMPACTS SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Going back to school after the summer often comes with some anxiety and stress, but this year students will likely need a lot more support, reassurance, and comforting before they'll be able to learn. Most children are dealing with some level of trauma after the uncertainty of the past two school years – trauma can occur after anything bad happens that makes the individual feel unsafe or scared. Even families who haven't faced the loss of loved ones, financial stress, or trouble at home have had their sense of safety and security disrupted. This has an especially strong impact on children, as their brains are still developing.

You can help young people move forward despite trauma – use your classroom to create situations in which they have choices, control, and feel empowered.

PRIORITIZE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SAFETY IN SCHOOLS AND CLASSROOMS

Trauma is really tough on the brain – it's likely that students won't feel like their normal selves. The mind and body have to feel safe to reverse the impact of trauma and feel "normal" again – students can't effectively learn without those basic needs met first. Children often don't have the coping skills needed to handle trauma on their own, so creating this safe environment is crucial to their healing, and thus classroom behavior and learning potential.

Ways you can do this:

- *Be open about your own feelings.* If you're having a bad day, ask if they ever have days when it seems like nothing goes right. Ask for their patience on your off days – it shows them that when one of us is down, the rest can help out and make things easier. It can also encourage them to tell you upfront if they're having a difficult day so you can be prepared to support them.
- *Model empathy and active listening.* Many times, kids just need to feel heard and seen. Don't dismiss their concerns or tell them not to worry – take what they share with you seriously and thank them for being open with you.

BUILD A STRONG CLASSROOM COMMUNITY.

For students coming in with trauma and anxiety, giving them some control is one of the best things you can do to help them feel more at ease. Many children have gone through similar experiences but felt alone in it, especially given the isolation that came with COVID-19. It's important to help them rebuild social connections and support – peer relationships are crucial for social development. Feeling like part of a classroom team makes school a much more positive environment and holds children accountable to someone other than authority figures.

Ways you can do this:

- *Create a classroom contract together.* Set expectations, rules, and consequences as a group. Discuss what good students, good classmates, and good teachers look like – make sure they know their voices are heard and valued.
- *Be proactive in addressing bullying and disrespectful behavior.* Do this kindly and compassionately, but it's important for kids who may be a victim of bullying to know that you'll be on their side. Part of feeling safe in the classroom is feeling safe in that environment as a whole, not just with the teacher.

FOCUS ON POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT OVER PUNISHMENT

Many kids feel unheard or like their opinions and desires don't matter, especially after or during a traumatic experience. This often manifests as attention-seeking behaviors. If they get attention - even negative attention - through acting out, they'll likely continue those behaviors. Positive reinforcement is not only more compassionate – it also increases confidence and motivation, both of which are negatively impacted by trauma.

Ways you can do this:

- *Praise appropriate classroom behavior.* Highlighting student role models can motivate and inspire other students. It switches the narrative from "don't do anything wrong" to "let's see how great you can do."
- *Create opportunities for students to show off their strengths to teachers, peers, and themselves.* If a student finishes an independent assignment and didn't have further instructions and starts drawing at their desk without interrupting anyone, don't call out that it's math time – instead, praise their quiet transition and art skills. If you need to redirect them, frame it positively: "I didn't think anyone would finish so quickly! I'd like us to stay focused on math during this time – could you pull out your workbook?"



WORK WITH THE FAMILY.

You only know so much about your student's home life, especially at the start of a new year. Inviting their family to be a part of the team can help you better understand and support the student with whatever challenges may come up throughout the year. It's helpful to be aware of what your students' families have gone through over the last year and a half (if they're open to sharing) and what resources they have available at home. By making yourself a resource to the parents, they are more likely to be engaged in their child's education, which helps both the student and the teacher.

Ways you can do this:

- *Reach out proactively with positive feedback.* Most families only hear from school when there is negative information to share, like that their child got in trouble or was hurt. Sharing that their child was especially helpful to a student in need or that you were impressed by their book report establishes that you really care about their student.
- *Give families your contact information.* Decide your own boundaries here – maybe you're fine with them having your cell phone number, or maybe you'd rather keep it to email. Tell them when, how, and for what reasons they can or should reach out to you.

INCREASE YOUR TRAUMA COMPETENCY

Integrating trauma-informed classroom strategies is beneficial to all students, and small changes can make a big difference in student well-being and success.

Ways you can do this:

- *Know your student population.* Different communities experience different types of trauma – know the demographics of your class and educate yourself on what issues different students may face. Understand the cultural differences that show up in coping with trauma and mental health challenges.
- *Connect with local organizations doing on-the-ground work.* There are some things that you can't provide directly to your students and families, but other organizations can – like financial resources or low-cost, healthy food. Know how these issues intersect with youth mental health and student performance and help provide your families with solutions.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE FOR TEACHERS

WE Teachers, in collaboration with MHA, has developed a free module to give teachers the materials, resources and activities to support your students in identifying and dealing with trauma. You'll learn about what trauma is and how it exists within students and/or the classroom, explore how to identify trauma within a student and discover the importance and benefits of developing a trauma-informed classroom.

Visit teachershub.we.org/courses/we-teachers-introductory-module-trauma-informed-classroom for more information.

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