

BACK TO IN-PERSON LEARNING: Trauma Informed Tips for Promoting Student Re-engagement, Wellbeing, and Resilience

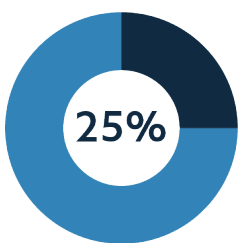


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The COVID-19 pandemic and experiences of systemic inequity have affected many students, families, and schools. It is estimated that up to 25% of children and adolescents experienced worsened emotional and cognitive health during the pandemic, with LGBTQ youth and youth of color at higher risk for experiencing a decline in mental health (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2021).



Stress, trauma, and adversity impact students' abilities to listen, learn, follow rules, and engage in the classroom, in large part because they shake students' sense of safety. In transitioning back to in-person learning, educators will likely see a range of potential stress-related behaviors from students, such as:



- Withdrawing or “zoning out”
- Engagement in harmful behaviors
- Hyperactivity, fidgetiness, talkativeness
- Mistrust of others/hesitancy to connect
- Concentration difficulties and/or inattention
- Irritability/anger or becoming frustrated
- Appearing tired
- Disruptive behaviors

As schools reopen for in-person learning, it is essential for educators to remain attuned to and create space for students' socioemotional needs. Providing ongoing emotional support to students as they process and recover from the pandemic will directly benefit students' academic achievement, as well as their overall health and wellbeing. By detecting patterns in behavior and identifying stressors, teachers can respond swiftly to signs of emotional dysregulation and build a safe and healing environment.



Create a Safe and Healing Environment

Feeling safe is a necessary component for emotional wellbeing and optimal school performance.



Foster Feelings and Experiences of Safety

- Explain COVID-19 precautions at school.
- Encourage students to share feelings about returning to school and validate the full range of students' emotions.
- Ask students what they need to feel safe at school. When possible, engage students in problem-solving to address their needs.
- Affirm students' identities.
- Employ fair and timely interventions when there are conflicts or harmful interactions.
- Openly discuss the school's anti-bullying policies and take each report seriously.

Give Students a Sense of Control

- Embed choice in directives (e.g., "Do you want to complete your work now or would you like a five-minute break first?").
- Help students feel heard by offering opportunities to negotiate, share interests, and express opinions.
- Solicit input, whenever possible.

Promote Predictability and Consistency

- Create and clearly display a set schedule and rules.
- Enforce rules consistently and fairly.
- Engage students in developing classroom norms and routines. Notify students in advance of any changes to routines or norms and provide reminders.

Build Meaningful Relationships

Healing happens in the context of meaningful relationships. Connecting with students can offset feelings of disconnection and isolation experienced by many over the past year.



Create Intentional Opportunities for Connection

- Schedule one-on-one check-ins with students.
- Be visible outside of the classroom- informal interactions are meaningful.

Practice Sensitive Communication

- Teach and embody compassion, kindness, and empathy in the classroom.
- Ask questions from a trauma informed perspective—for example, instead of “What is wrong with you?” ask, “What have you been going through lately?”
- Offer validating statements such as, “I can see that was really challenging for you.”
- Listen with “two ears” (Frydman & Mayor, 2017), attending to both the spoken message and the emotions underlying message.

Provide Strength-Based Feedback

- Use specific praise: “I noticed how focused you’ve been during math today, awesome!” vs “Good job today.”
- Praise for effort, not just outcome: “Keep working hard, you’re doing great”

Incorporate Technology to Increase Connection

- Leverage technology used during remote learning to connect peers to peers, families to teachers, and teachers to students.
- Offer parent/caregiver outreach and family support (e.g., parent workshops) and community-building activities (e.g., family game nights) virtually.
- School-based counselors may similarly be able to integrate families into services via video platforms.

Enhance Emotional Wellbeing

Emotional wellbeing is a foundational piece of a resilience informed approach.



Use the “5:1 Ratio” to Promote Positive Interactions

To maintain a positive teacher-student relationship, have five positive interactions to every one negative interaction. Examples include:

- Friendly conversations
- Specific praise or positive feedback
- Non-verbal acknowledgment (smiles or thumbs up)
- Leaving notes of appreciation for students
- Giving frequent “shout outs”

Create “Islands of Competence”

- Implement strength-based activities in the classroom such as making a list of successes or provide opportunities for students to show off their talents.
- Teach positive self-talk to students such as: “I am smart.” “I can calm myself down.” “I am a good, loving person.”

Take a “Low and Slow” Approach

- Lower the tone and speed of your voice, slow down movements, and avoid sudden movements.
- Speak in simple, clear, and short sentences.
- Mirror students’ emotions mindfully; some mirroring communicates empathy and caring, but too much may be overwhelming or escalating for youth.

“Change the Channel”

Think of the brain as a remote control where we can “change the channel” away from distressing thoughts and toward pleasant or neutral thoughts.

For example:

- Count 5 green and 4 yellow things in the room.
- Say the alphabet backwards.
- Think of the first 10 lines of a song/movie.

References

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