

Common Trauma Symptoms in Students and Helpful Strategies for Educators

Trauma can have a detrimental impact on students' functioning in the school setting.¹ Educators need tools to identify and support students who may have experienced or are currently experiencing traumatic stress.

The front of this handout lists common trauma symptoms grouped into the following categories: **physical, cognitive, social and emotional, language and communication, and learning.**² It is important to note that children can respond to trauma in many different ways and may not exhibit all of these symptoms. You can use this list to guide your thinking in identifying students who may have experienced trauma and providing or referring students to appropriate supports.

The back of this handout outlines strategies for working with students who may exhibit emotional or behavioral symptoms of trauma. You can use **preventative strategies** in everyday classroom interactions, **"in the moment" strategies** when students are in crisis, and **"after the moment" strategies**³ after a student's behaviors and emotions have deescalated. These strategies generally target students' **safety, positive relationships, and self-regulation**, and are focused on **teaching appropriate skills and avoiding punishment** (which may re-traumatize students).

Physical

- Increased somatic complaints (e.g., headaches and stomachaches)
- Over- or under-reacting to stimuli (e.g., getting startled easily [or not at all] by bells, physical contact, doors slamming, sirens)
- Increased activity level (e.g., fidgeting, getting out of seat)
- Withdrawal from other people and activities

Cognitive

- Recreating the traumatic event (e.g., repeatedly talking about or "playing out" the event) or avoiding topics that serve as reminders
- Difficulties with executive function (e.g., impulse control, attention)
- Worry and fear about safety of self and others
- Dissociation (e.g., disconnected from surroundings, "spacing out")

Social and Emotional

- Rapid changes in heightened emotions (e.g., extremely sad to angry)
- Change in ability to interpret or respond appropriately to social cues
- Difficulties with emotion regulation and impulse control (e.g., angry outbursts, aggression, increased distress)
- Emotional numbness, isolation, and detachment

Language and Communication

- Language development delays and challenges
- Difficulties with expressive (e.g., expressing thoughts and feelings) and receptive language (e.g., understanding nonverbal cues)
- Difficulties with nonverbal communication (e.g., eye contact)
- Use of hurtful language (e.g., to keep others at a distance)

Learning

- Absenteeism and changes in academic performance/engagement
- Difficulties with authority, redirection, or criticism
- Difficulties listening and concentrating during instruction
- Difficulties with memory (e.g., may require more repetitions)
- Difficulties generalizing learned material in different contexts

¹ Honsinger & Brown, 2019.

² Symptoms adapted from Statman-Weil, 2015 and National Child Traumatic Stress Network Schools Committee, 2008.

³ Strategies adapted from Honsinger & Brown, 2019.

PREVENTATIVE STRATEGIES



Safe and Predictable Environment

- ❖ **Create** a welcoming classroom environment (e.g., greet students by name, do show and tells)
- ❖ **Post** class expectations at the front of the classroom
- ❖ **Display** a daily schedule and explain any deviations
- ❖ **Prepare** students for transitions (e.g., give a signal)
- ❖ **Communicate** clear safety procedures



Relationship Building

- ❖ **Talk** to students about their hobbies and interests
- ❖ **Use** a respectful tone during interactions
- ❖ **Involve** students in developing behavior/safety plans
- ❖ **Try** the 2x10 strategy with challenging students (talk with the student for at least 2 minutes each day for 10 days in a row)



Self-Regulation

- ❖ **Incorporate** activities that build coping strategies (e.g. identifying and validating emotions, deep breathing)
- ❖ **Create** calming spaces or break times with constructive activities that are *not* used as a punishment/time-out
- ❖ **Model and practice** appropriate social skills
- ❖ **Teach** students how to name and scale their emotions (e.g. rate anger on a scale of 1-5)

“IN THE MOMENT” STRATEGIES



Safe and Predictable Environment

1. **Be aware** of the student’s body language, tone of voice, and emotional state
2. **Direct** other students to follow outlined safety procedures
3. **Provide** student with the opportunity to go to a safe space (e.g., meditation room, counseling office)
4. **Alert** appropriate support staff, when necessary



Relationship Building

1. **Project** calmness while approaching student using verbal and nonverbal techniques (e.g., using a respectful tone, sitting beside the student instead of standing over them)
2. **Show** you are listening and giving your full attention
3. **Express** that you care for the student and that they are safe



Self-Regulation

1. **Relax** before responding (deep breath, count to 10)
2. **Encourage** student to use relaxation and coping skills, and “comfort” objects
3. **Validate** student emotions (e.g., “You seem frustrated right now. Is that correct?”)
4. **Assist** the student in identifying reasonable and safe response options (e.g., go to the counselor’s office)

✗ When a student is in crisis, DO NOT: ✗

- ❖ Argue or get into a power struggle
- ❖ Raise your voice
- ❖ Handle the situation in public or in front of student’s peers
- ❖ Use punitive punishment

“AFTER THE MOMENT” STRATEGIES

- ❖ **Provide** students with a safe place to talk about what happened
- ❖ **Engage** in a discussion with the student that includes:
 - Praise for any relaxation or coping skills the student used
 - Appropriate responses and strategies to use if the situation arises again
 - Potential consequences or negative outcomes if negative behavior continues
 - Specific steps for successfully resuming the classroom routine
- ❖ **Refer** students to other resources and supports or notify appropriate school support staff, when necessary

References

- Honsinger, C. & Brown, M. H. (2019). Preparing trauma-sensitive teachers: Strategies for teacher educators. *Teacher Educators’ Journal*, 12, 129-15.
- National Child Traumatic Stress Network Schools Committee. (2008). *Child trauma toolkit for educators*. Los, Angeles, CA & Durham, NC: National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.
- Statman-Weil, K. (2015). Creating trauma-sensitive classrooms. *Young Children*, 70(2), 72-79.