

POLICY BRIEF

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Creating a Positive Classroom Climate to Support Students' Experiences of Stress & Trauma

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Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event.¹ Living and schooling during a pandemic is traumatic. More than 2/3 of children under the age of 16 have been exposed to some form of traumatic stress, and this was prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.² Although all students have been exposed to this potentially traumatic pandemic, this does not mean the pandemic has been traumatic to all students. Trauma is very individualized – an event may be traumatic to one student, but the same event may only be stressful to another student.

Students that experience the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic as traumatic will have different behavioral and emotional outcomes. These outcomes include being more disengaged, anxious, defiant, aggressive, emotionally sensitive, inattentive, emotionally explosive, clingy, and even may engage in hoarding behaviors. It is important to remember that a student's behavior is telling us something when they may not have the words or know how to express what they are experiencing. It is our job to figure out what they are trying to communicate through their behaviors so we are better able to support our students.

Teacher Self-Reflection

Educators must not fall into the trap of using typical "at-risk" indicators, like race or ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, to potentially identify students considered traumatized. Instead, look for behavioral indicators from students like withdrawal or intense emotional reactions. Also take the time to learn about any family difficulties that emerged for your students during the pandemic. Educators must then engage in some self-reflection: *Why do I think this student has*

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experienced trauma? What do I need to do to support my students? What do I need to do to create a positive learning environment for all my students?

Engaging in self-reflection and understanding the developmental implications of students experiencing a pandemic will reduce the likelihood that educators perceive students emotional and behavioral reactions as traumatic or warranting punitive disciplinary reactions. Punitive discipline for behavioral or emotional outbursts are not what students need. Students need educators who are steady, empathic, calm, and supportive, and this is critical for racial and ethnic minority students, especially Black and Brown students who already disproportionately experience punitive disciplinary reactions.

A Bumpy Return to School: It is Normal

Educators must acknowledge that students time away from school has been difficult, and a number of behavioral and emotional outbursts will occur as part of the normal transition back to the school community. This is not trauma. All school personnel need to provide a positive school community that supports students social and emotional development, and educators need to provide their students with the vocabulary and opportunities to express themselves.

Your students will have questions – lots of questions! However, ask your students what they know or have heard before you respond with an answer. This will help you gauge the depth of their questions and how best to respond developmentally. Be honest but reassuring in your response. Be open to sharing your own feelings and create a space for students to share theirs. Normalizing the diverse set of feelings that students and educators may be feeling is important in building students' social and emotional competence (SEC) skills. Children with age appropriate SEC skills have better academic engagement and outcome, more positive social relationships, and better mental health.³

Recommendations

To facilitate your students' positive social emotional development in classrooms, the following culturally- and contextually-relevant strategies are proposed:

- **Acknowledge – Label – Validate – Plan:**
 - **Acknowledge** your students' emotions: Do not minimize or dismiss their emotions.
 - **Label** your students emotions: Name the emotion you think the student may be experiencing and ask the student if you are correct. Provide them with a rich

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vocabulary of emotion words beyond happy, sad, afraid, and angry. This teaches and models for them ways to express how one feels.

- **Validate** your students' emotions: Let your students know that what they are feeling is normal and valid. Never tell your student not to feel an emotion or that they do not have a reason for feeling a certain emotion.
- **Plan**: Help your student make a plan for how to cope with what they are feeling. Make sure you are allowing the child to have voice in the coping strategies that may work best for them.
- Engage in daily emotional check-ins with your students to give you an idea of how they are doing each day and help identify students that need a more in depth check-in.
- Conduct classroom discussions where students are supported and encouraged to share their feelings and thoughts.
- Initiate conversations about stress and trauma by creating a supportive environment where students can share their feelings verbally, writing, drawing, or performing. Do not wait until your students bring up these issues.
- SEC strategies and academics need to be intertwined and integrated (e.g., utilizing literacy as a means to promote and teach students' social emotional competence skills). Use school content to making connections to students' real life experiences.

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¹ American Psychological Association (n.d.). *Trauma*. <https://www.apa.org/topics/trauma/>

² SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. (2020). *Understanding child trauma*. <https://www.samhsa.gov/child-trauma/understanding-child-trauma>

³ Humphries, M. L., Keenan, K., & Wakschlag, L. S. (2012). Teacher and observer ratings of young African American children's social and emotional competence. *Psychology in the Schools, 49*(4), 311-327.