Trauma Responsive Educator

Strengthening the capacity of educators to meet the needs of students coping with trauma

School Is Back In Session!

TREPEducator.org/magazine

Project Director's Note

All of us expected the pandemic to be over within weeks, then we accepted months, and now here we are accepting that recovery will take years.

All of you are managing the daunting task of resuming in-person learning in the middle of surging infections—a nerve racking experience for you, your students, and their families.

As we continue this new academic year, it is critical to *intentionally promote a school climate that is racially and ethnically inclusive.* This is to ensure that all students experience your school and your classroom as safe and responsive to the hostile racial climate experienced by Asian, Black, Indigenous, and Latinx children. The broader hostile racial climate only compounds the distress created by the pandemic and the psychological and emotional harm students are experiencing will show up in their behaviors at school.

 Thankfully, what we do in our schools and classrooms does make a difference.

Micere Keels

30 Days of Mental Health to Start the Academic Year

Given the state of child and youth wellbeing, mental health promotion must be integrated into the daily work of schools.

Join the 30 Days of Mental Health campaign to obtain no-cost, easy-to-use lessons to help you talk with children and youth about mental health and mental illness.

Learn more at *30DaysOfMentalHealth.org*

Strengthening Student Resilience: Lessons Learned During the First Year of the Pandemic
By Micere Keels, Kat Edmiston, & Pranathi Posa

The pandemic will leave a permanent mark on all our lives and memories. We cannot go back to what was, and for vulnerable children, we want a different future than what was before the pandemic. As we collectively move forward, we can use the challenges created by the pandemic as opportunities to build and strengthen resilience in our students.

Creating the Conditions to Facilitate Growth in Response to Intense Stressors

Not all stress is bad for development. In fact, most stress is helpful for child and adult development. There are three kinds of stress: positive, tolerable, and toxic stress.

Positive stress comes from the events in our lives that induce feelings that we can learn to manage, master, and largely control. This is especially true when we have the support of others while we create an environment that allows us to feel generally safe and cared for while learning to manage the stressor. Regular exposure to positive stressors builds our coping capacity, enables us to discover our inner strengths, build resilience, develop persistence, and practice to overcome challenges.

Tolerable stress occurs from experiences that astrain our normal coping abilities. This can include the death of a family member, a serious illness or injury, a contentious divorce, a natural disaster, or an act of terrorism. When the individual has enough well-developed coping skills and/or receives enough external coping support to recover from the potentially damaging experience, the stress is experienced as tolerable.
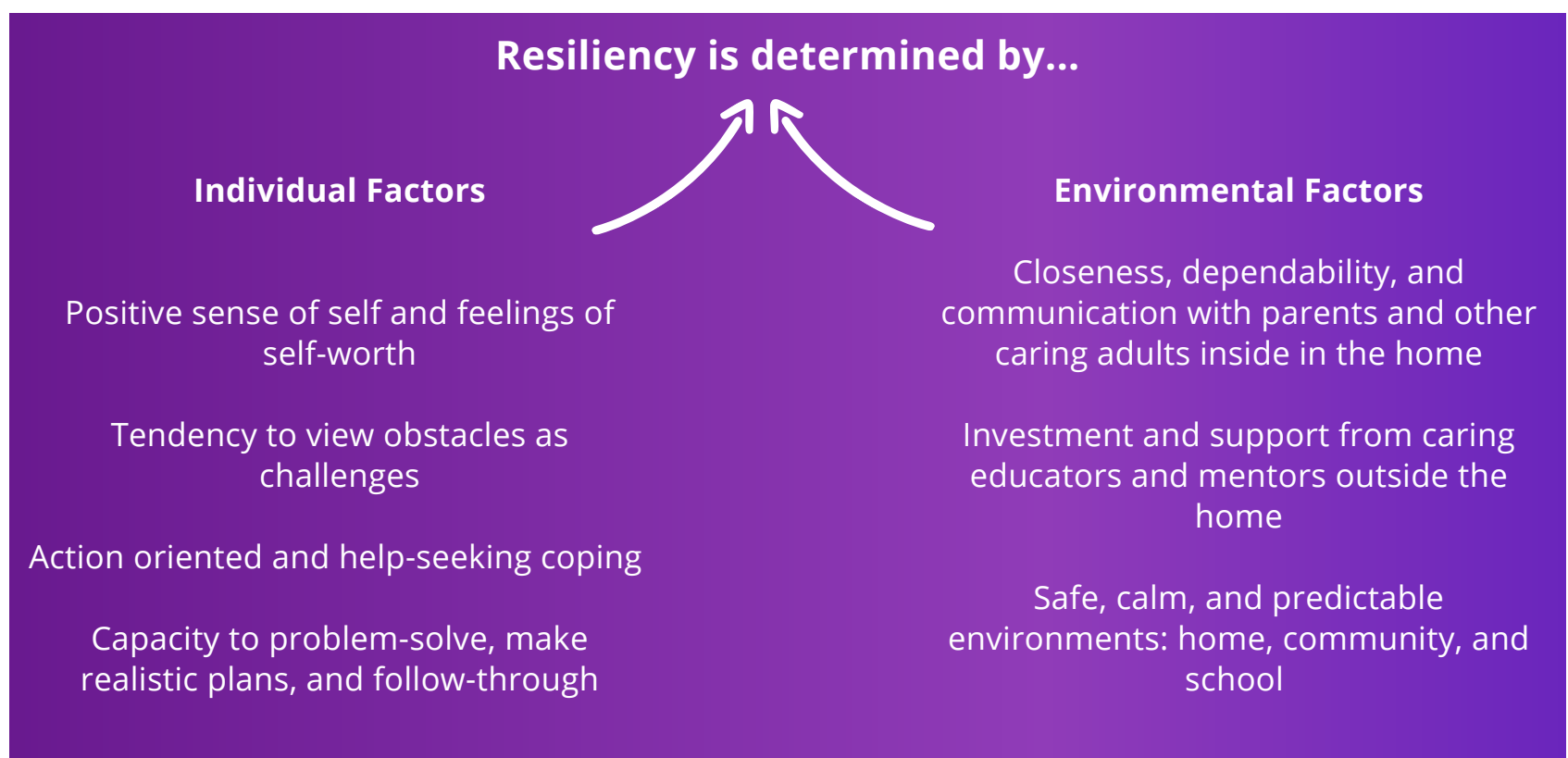
Toxic stress occurs when events are so physically, psychologically, and/or emotionally damaging, and in the absence of buffering social support, that the brain and body's stress management chemicals become toxic. A stressor can go from being initially toxic to becoming tolerable when children experience protection and support that calms their physiological and psychological stress systems, enabling them to adapt, cope, and grow.

Positive Stress	**Tolerable Stress**	**Toxic Stress**
Mild/moderate and short-lived stress exposure that is necessary for healthy development.	More severe stress exposure, limited in duration, time and support for recovery.	Extreme, frequent, or extended activation of the body's stress response **without the buffering presence of a supportive adult.**

There is no doubt that the pandemic has been stressful for all, but what will determine whether it will be remembered as a tolerable or toxic stressor are the ways that adults enable children to experience feelings of safety in the midst of chaos and uncertainty. Children who receive protective, calming, and reassuring support will remember the pandemic as a pivotal time in their lives that spurred post-traumatic growth. Post-traumatic growth occurs when people develop new understandings of themselves, new perspectives of the world around them, and new ways of relating to other people or things, as a result of a crisis.

While some children will experience post-traumatic growth following the pandemic, all will need support to exhibit resilience to persevere through the pandemic. *Resilience is* the ability to thrive following a challenging experience or adverse situation. Resilience comes from a combination of internal, external, and contextual factors.

Resiliency is determined by...

Individual Factors

Positive sense of self and feelings of self-worth

Tendency to view obstacles as challenges

Action oriented and help-seeking coping

Capacity to problem-solve, make realistic plans, and follow-through

Environmental Factors

Closeness, dependability, and communication with parents and other caring adults inside in the home

Investment and support from caring educators and mentors outside the home

Safe, calm, and predictable environments: home, community, and school

Educators often underestimate their ability to help children develop resilience. The way educators **choose to frame resilience** will significantly impact how well students cope with the difficulties of the pandemic. **Framing resilience** refers to the way we understand what resilience is and where it comes from.

When we correctly frame resilience as something we can foster rather than as a trait that people are either born with or without, we can create policies and practices that enable educators to engage with students in ways that strengthen the coping skills that can make them resilient to the stressors of this pandemic.

Protective factors *are individual and contextual factors that promote resilience within children. Individual factors include children believing in themselves and their innate worth, willingly engaging in discussion with other children, being motivated, and being willing to take risks, along with other factors. Contextual factors include the support given by a child's family and mentors, and members of their neighborhood and school community.*

Educators are key mentors in children's lives, especially when the children lack more traditional family and community support. As an educator, you create protective external environments that facilitate children's development of resilient qualities when you:

- *Set and communicate high expectations*
- *Provide a caring and supportive school environment*
- *Create opportunities for meaningful participation, such as students helping others and making decisions within the classroom and school community*
- *Teach life and social skills and enable students to develop relationships with their peers*

Building Educator Capacity

In March 2020, soon after it became clear that the pandemic would destabilize many children's lives, we received a flood of questions from educators who have been thrust into a role for which most have received little training—supporting the psychological and emotional wellbeing of children in distress. In response, we created an *online course on trauma and trauma-responsive educational practices.*

The course includes open-response questions asking educators to share what they were doing to support students. Two of the questions focused on actions that could promote resilience and foster post-traumatic growth. We now share this wealth of responses in hopes that you will be able to implement some of them with your students as you support them on their journey to develop resilience that will sustain them during this continuing pandemic.

Strategies for Promoting Safety

The top five strategies that educators believe matter the most for enabling students to feel safe amid the pandemic are:

✔ Maintaining connections
✔ Showing empathy and flexibility
✔ Creating consistency and predictability through routines
✔ Building children's coping skills
✔ Supporting the home environment

These are strategies that most of you are probably doing, and we are highlighting them to encourage you to continue doing them consistently, now and in the coming years.

MAINTAINING CONNECTIONS WITH CAREGIVERS

Educators listed the importance of maintaining connections not only with students, but also with parents and other caregivers. As one educator reflected: *"[I have been] keeping an open line of communications, whether by email, phone or an online meeting to keep a connection with the student and their family. Students who feel connected want to do well." ~D. Z.*

If educators are able to communicate frequently and effectively, then they can address parents' concerns about managing remote and hybrid learning, which have largely centered around the need for and frustrations about having an open line of communication with the school. Here are some of the helpful suggestions that educators provided for how to maintain connections with parents and caregivers:

"Call and reach out to the parents and caregivers, and make sure to ask about other things besides schoolwork." ~R. C.

"Asking about positive things in the home, which can help keep people motivated and feel connected to the entire school community." ~O. O.

"Give parents up-to-date information and address their concerns." ~W. J.

MAINTAINING CONNECTIONS AMONG CHILDREN

Educators also mentioned the importance of helping students maintain their peer connections. As one educator stated: *"Having access to their peers and teachers at school will enable them to receive comforting interactions that they might not be getting at home." ~S. M.*

Children and adolescents are particularly dependent on their friends for establishing their sense of who they are and where they belong. While the pandemic has disrupted the natural connections fostered in casual interactions at school, friendships and peer relationships are as important as ever. Here are some of the helpful suggestions that educators provided for how to foster the maintenance of peer connections:

'Implement mentor and mentee relationships between peers." ~J. S.

"Create the opportunity for students to have unstructured conversations and casual time with their peers to maintain friendships and relationships; allow them to share with their peers what's going on in their lives." ~K. K.

"Use asynchronous opportunities for students to share with each other, such as sharing videos of themselves to their classmates and teachers." ~K. L.

EMPATHY AND FLEXIBILITY

Educators emphasized the importance of having empathy for students and providing emotional support. The pandemic imposed an incredible burden on students that required, and still requires, adjusting academic and emotional expectations. Students who were once able to handle eight hours of school, two hours of extracurricular activities, and several hours of homework, now carry the additional burden of the pandemic. This reduces the amount of cognitive space they have for academic learning. with caregivers. Educators listed the importance of maintaining connections not only with students, but also with parents and caregivers.

As one educator reflected: *"[I have been] keeping an open line of communications, whether by email, phone or an online meeting to keep a connection with the student and their family. Students who feel connected want to do well."* ~D. Z.

By creating an empathetic and flexible classroom, educators can provide necessary support and space for students struggling with the pandemic. Here are some of the helpful suggestions that educators provided for how to build empathetic and flexible classroom environments:

"Creating a space either through one-on-one meetings or classroom discussion where students can talk about their lives outside of school." ~K. F.	*"Find ways for students to engage asynchronously and give students the choice of how they want to engage."* ~S. D.	*"Encouraging participation where students can, even if that means being more liberal about turning assignments in or the type of work assigned (e.g. group work)."* ~A. W.

BUILDING CHILDREN'S COPING SKILLS

This devastating pandemic has created one interesting opportunity: adults can help children learn coping skills that will help them in future crises and disasters. When adults coach children and adolescents through the process of learning to manage a traumatic event, they are developing coping skills that will make them more resilient when they have to manage future life stressors on their own.

Common understanding. The pandemic is a confusing time for children, and it is often difficult for them to understand why their lives have changed so drastically. Explaining the reasons for these changes and helping them understand that the pandemic is a temporary situation will strengthen their ability to cope. As one educator said: "Adults that answer children's questions about the pandemic honestly, while sharing their own fears and worries would support a child. Families that focus on the facts and the science of viruses would support children in this time more than those who heighten [the] drama of it." ~J. B.

Adaptive coping in response to uncertainty. Students who are taught and given resources to learn proper coping strategies will find that it is much easier to handle the uncertainty of the pandemic. Adaptive coping is the ability to use active problem-solving techniques to manage the stress of challenging events and improve one's life and situation. The adults in their lives will have to model these strategies so that children can emulate them. As one educator said: *"If parents and teachers can model coping strategies and help develop adaptive coping in children, then students may be able to grow from the experience. Families and schools should communicate about what supports and resources a child might need and work together to provide unified guidance, comfort, and stability during a very challenging time..."* ~R. E.

Here are some of the helpful suggestions provided regarding how to help children build adaptive coping skills:

"Teaching children about the virus and how to help prevent it can provide them with a sense of control. This includes why we use masks, how masks work, hand-washing, and answering questions about the vaccine." ~F. K.

"Model healthy ways to handle stress, such as mindfulness, exercise, or meditation." ~M. N.

"Show children how to create and maintain schedules for activities and responsibilities. Teach them how to rely on a network of teachers, neighbors, and family members for support. If they can adapt in this way, it builds their confidence to adapt to new and different situations." ~EB

CREATING CONSISTENCY AND PREDICTABILITY THROUGH ROUTINES

Children depend on routines for structure in their lives, which helps them feel safe. The pandemic disrupted routines by moving school online and cutting off many of the activities that kept their time organized. Creating some kind of routine is particularly important now, so that students feel safe and know what to expect from school. As one educator stated: *"I think keeping a set routine will help all understand what is coming and what [has] already happened. This will leave them with a feeling of control over what they are doing."* ~H. B.

Consistency and predictability combine to make one of the core components of trauma-responsive education. When individuals are stressed and distressed, they are often searching for some aspect of consistency to hold on to as a way of gaining a sense of control. Here are some of the helpful suggestions that educators provided to create stabilizing routines:

"Regularly post what topics will be covered in class and what the schedule for the day is in advance." ~L. J.	*"Build routines that are easy to follow but flexible, such as assigning work on asynchronous schedules without penalizing for late work." ~L. S.*	*"Use community building exercises such as "Rose, bud, thorn," "AHA, Apology, Appreciation," to create a set time for student reflection." ~E. B.*

SUPPORTIVE HOME ENVIRONMENT

Given remote and hybrid learning and social distancing requirements, the home environment has become more important than ever in determining how a child copes with stress and trauma. Educators recognized the role that emotional support and academic support would have in helping students feel safe and stable through the upheaval of the pandemic. As one educator pointed out:12
"The COVID-19 pandemic could become a tolerable stressor for some children who have a stable home environment with caring and consistent adults, stable housing, and consistent availability to food. Children could be forming deeper family bonds with caregivers given the increased time together." ~R. P.
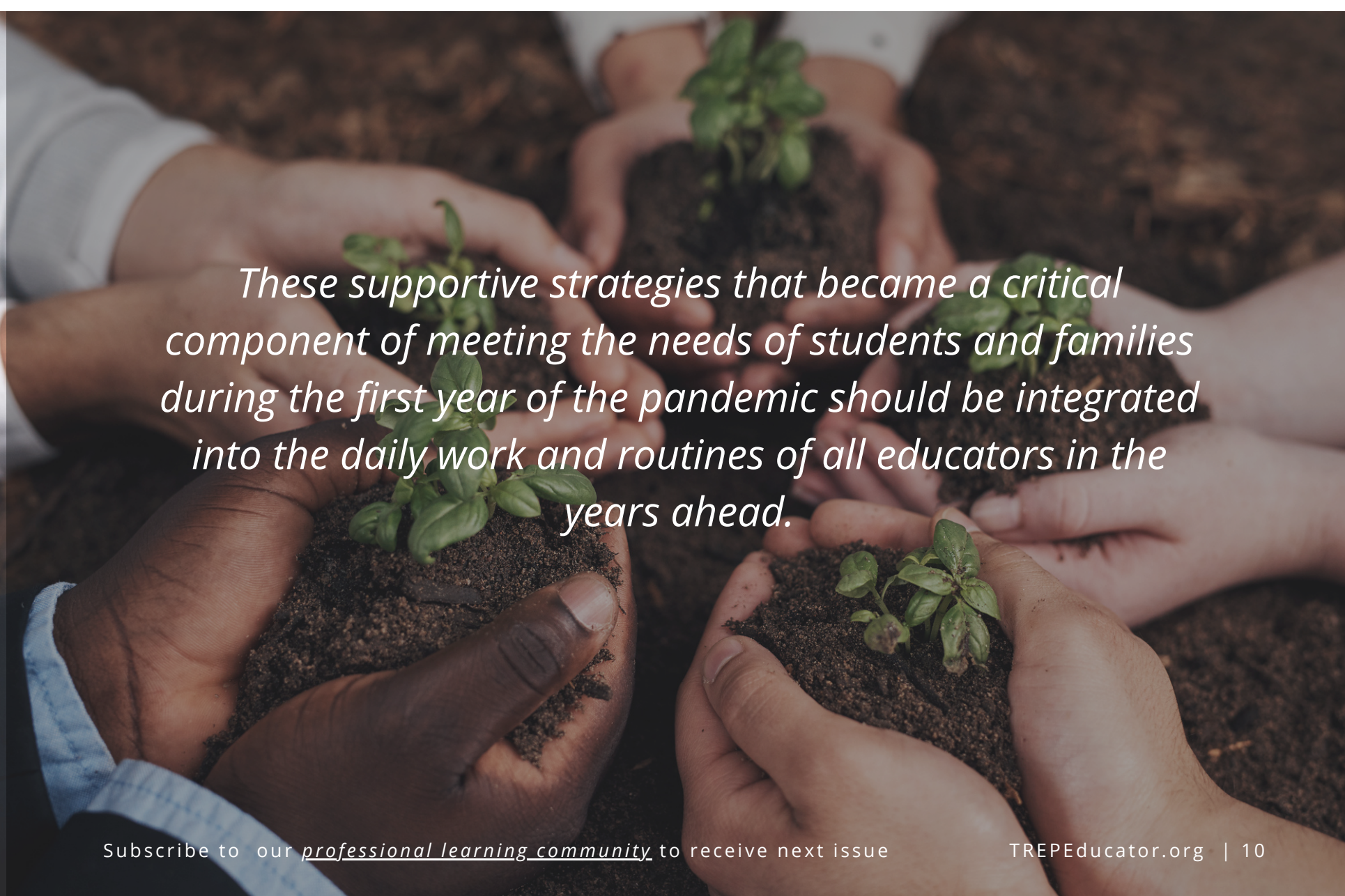
The home environment. The home environment is one of the most important factors in a child's sense of wellbeing and ability to be resilient during the pandemic. Several educators expressed concerns about students in vulnerable home environments whose problems had only compounded since the beginning of the pandemic. Whether that instability in the home comes from parents, financial difficulties, a lack of food, or something else, instability in the home can only heighten children's stress and trauma from the pandemic. As one educator said: *"If some children are in unstable homes, being home all day and not being able to go to their safe place of school could make it a potential stressor." ~K. D.*

Supportive caregivers. The most frequent response was the importance of supportive caregivers. When children have supportive parents and adults in their lives, they have a support system that allows them to feel safe and stable. As one educator stated: *"The COVID-19 Pandemic can become a tolerable stressor for some children if they [have] caring and supportive individuals in their lives. Teachers, social workers, therapists, and parents can all act in support of the child helping them build their resilience despite the challenging and uncertain times."* ~C. F.

Here are some of the helpful suggestions for how to ensure that children are in a safe and stable home, and to help caregivers be as supportive as possible:

"Have one-on-one meetings with students and ask them how they feel, in addition to setting up activities so students don't feel socially-distant, even if they are physically distant." ~J. W.

"Reach out to students and inform them that, even though they are not physically in school, they can always talk to a teacher or the school if they are in trouble at home." ~H.D.

These supportive strategies that became a critical component of meeting the needs of students and families during the first year of the pandemic should be integrated into the daily work and routines of all educators in the years ahead.

The mind is like water.

When it's turbulent it's difficult to see.

When it's calm, everything becomes clear.

~Prasad Mahes

The **Trauma Responsive Educational Practices (TREP) Project** is a research-practice translation project that works to connect research on the science of trauma with the realities of school and classroom management. We aim to create schools and classrooms that can meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of students coping with toxic levels of stress and trauma.