

Five ways to support students affected by trauma

Summarized from article by Lea Waters and Tom Brunzell, 2018

Trauma-informed education has helped teachers to evolve from the question of “What is wrong with this student?” to “What has this student been through?” In the field of positive psychology, we add a further question: “What does this student need to reach their potential?”

1. Positive relationships. Trauma-affected students have more relationship challenges to navigate than most. These students can be dealing with harmful relationships at home and then come to school to manage relationships not only with their teachers but also with social workers, police officers, and clinicians—all while living out their daily lives.

It is critical that we help these students feel safe and trusting where possible, so they learn to develop social intelligence and seek out positive bonds with others. Teachers may be the only people who help these students learn what a healthy, supportive relationship feels like. Building relational trust involves simple teaching practices such as smiling, sharing parts of your life with your students, getting to know your students as individuals, and using yourself as a role model of a reliable and regulated adult.

2. Positive physical space. The physical layout and look of your classroom can be used to build positive emotions. Putting up positive visuals and quotes can inspire creative thinking and teamwork in your students. Increased natural light or soft lighting can enhance an open, warm, and relaxing environment.

Consider how the furniture and seating is arranged in your class. Is it helping students to feel safe and connected? You could also bring plants into the room or create a mindfulness corner, a dedicated space that students can visit when they need to regulate their stress response. The corner can

include a bean bag, mindful coloring books, squeeze toys, noise-cancelling headphones, and more.

3. Positive priming. Following the research of [Barbara Frederickson](#), you can use simple priming techniques to foster positive emotions such as contentment, pride, awe, and wonder in class.

[Brain breaks](#) are one helpful technique. The teachers who work with us have found that brain breaks are most effective when students reflect on the type of energy they need at that moment for learning: *Escalating* brain breaks build positive energy and emotions such as joy, happiness, and wonder (e.g., clapping games, thumb wars, laughter yoga, racing around the desk), while *de-escalating* brain breaks build calm emotions such as contentment and serenity, which help a student to feel safe and focused (e.g., silently tracing the movements of a partner, triangle breathing, playing music or repeating mantras, and body movements such as shoulder shrugging or pumping your toes inside your shoes).

You can also use positive primers to boost positive emotion when students first enter the classroom (such as by greeting them with the healthy touch of a handshake or a high five), during transitions (by turning transition routines into a silent game such as “follow the leader”), or during independent work breaks (by having students deliberately savor their accomplishment and share with a peer).

According to Fredrickson’s theory, helping your students build up their bank account of positive emotions over time changes their brain to help them learn more effectively, form better relationships, and become more resilient. Next time you are planning a lesson, think about how you can use positive primers throughout the learning experience.

4. Using character strengths. Teaching strengths in schools has been shown to increase [achievement and well-being](#). All students, especially trauma-affected students, need opportunities to identify, recognize, practice, and

use their [character strengths](#), which include qualities like kindness, humor, creativity, and bravery.

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Ways to help students learn about their own strengths and the strengths of others include strengths surveys (if their literacy skills allow), [strengths cards](#), and [strengths spotting exercises](#)—like identifying strengths in their heroes or playing a secret agent game where they are invited to “spy” on a fellow student to identify the strengths of that student. To teach about particular strengths, you could focus on stories in English and Humanities curriculums where characters or historical figures displayed those strengths. Strengths can also be developed through [performing arts, sports, and other co-curricula](#).

5. Building resilience. Sadly, you cannot always impact the life of a student outside of school, but you can teach resilience strategies that help a student affected by trauma to gain a better understanding of their situation and to counteract the negative messages of shame they often internalize.

Students can practice [resilience skills](#) through role plays that help them to act out skills such as setting boundaries and verbalizing their feelings, all while in the safety of a classroom. Literature, poetry, and song lyrics can help students identify examples of resilient thinking—for example, Ariana Grande’s song “No Tears Left to Cry” following the London terrorist attack at her concert. Analyzing the ways in which media figures, sports heroes, and other high-profile people explain their successes and failures showcases the difference between optimism and pessimism.

Teachers can also use moments in the learning process when students feel frustration or self-doubt to coach them on how to dispute their pessimism and automatic negative thinking (“*I can’t do this*”; “*I’m dumb*”) to make room for optimism and constructive thinking (“*Maybe I’m tired and I need a break*”; “*I solved the problem last week and I can do it again*”; “*It takes me a little longer than others, but I’ve come a long way*”). Learning resilience skills

can provide an internal psychological buffer for students when they are outside of school, as well as providing empowering experiences at school.