

# *trauma-sensitive* instruction

creating a safe and predictable  
classroom environment

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experiences may have made you more sensitive and aware of the impact of trauma on your students, or they may have made you less tolerant of some of the situations your students are facing. This lack of tolerance may lead someone to think, “I worked hard and overcame my traumatic situations, why can’t my students do the same?” In contrast, if your experiences have made you too sensitive, you may allow your students too much leeway so that they are unaccountable for their behaviors. Letting students get by with misbehaviors does not help them develop the resilience they need in order to overcome their trauma.

As we work to support teachers and leaders, many tell us that they are seeing more and more students impacted by trauma and mental health challenges. We have observed how trauma-impacted students struggle to focus and learn. These issues impact classroom and behavior management, and cause teachers to take time away from teaching and learning activities to address students’ mental health needs.

You don’t need to have experienced childhood trauma to try to empathize and understand your students’ perspectives. If you try to understand what your students might be experiencing, that’s a great first step. Being able to step back before reacting will help you better understand their situations and develop positive relationships to help you work with them more successfully.

## Purpose of This Book

You may wonder, “Why write a book on trauma-informed instruction?” As we work with educators in a variety of settings, we’ve noticed that more and more of them are dealing with children who come from homes where traumatic experiences are a regular occurrence. John worked with a school district in the Midwest in which the quiet of the neighborhood was interrupted by violence and gunshots on a nightly basis. Tom worked in an indigenous community where students are impacted by isolation, poverty, lack of meaningful employment, and alcoholism. These two situations can cause stress and trauma that students bring with them to their schools and classrooms.

As good as the educators may be in these two example settings, to help students learn and grow, they are equally challenged to find ways to help students become successful adults. These educators are hungry for ideas and strategies to help their students overcome their challenges and achieve both in and out of the classroom.

Since we both have experienced childhood trauma, worked to overcome its impacts, and have successfully helped students experiencing trauma, we decided to share our experiences so others can benefit from what we've seen and learned. This book is the culmination of our personal and professional experiences with trauma, resilience, mental health, school culture, and a myriad of other topics we have addressed as teachers, instructional leaders, and consultants since we began our careers in the early 1980s.

The book also contains research-proven and time-tested strategies and techniques to help positively impact the effects of trauma. These strategies will give you a well-rounded foundation to build on in your classroom.

### **Increase in Trauma and Mental Health Needs**

As educators working every day with students, you know about the increased incidents of students experiencing trauma and mental health challenges in your classrooms. The pressures and mental health challenges posed by students in crisis can take up valuable time that might be better dedicated to academic learning. These challenges can range from students who seem withdrawn and disconnected, to those who disrupt the learning of others. Janie Crecco (2017) outlined the original ACEs study and described childhood trauma as *America's hidden health crisis*. Thomas and her colleagues (2019) note, "This work sheds light on the importance of preventing childhood trauma and also recognizing and addressing the needs of youth exposed to adverse events prior to their journey into adulthood" (p. 424).

The topic of ACEs came to light in the 1990s with a study cosponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the health insurance company, Kaiser Permanente (CDC, 2020a). This study examined the early experiences of approximately 17,000 middle-class adults. The study participants were asked to respond to a questionnaire asking them to identify their experiences with adverse, stressful situations. The initial ACEs survey included experiences such as substance abuse in the home, parent incarceration, neglect of basic needs, and others (for more information, see [www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/about.html](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/about.html)).

The initial results of the original ACEs study are staggering. Almost 25 percent of the study participants had experienced two or more of the adverse experiences listed. More than one in sixteen had experienced four or more of the adverse experiences. Among the adults who participated in the study, those with higher ACEs

scores also had more health challenges. Truly, their childhood experiences impacted their lives as adults (CDC, 2020a).

Since the problem of childhood stress and mental health challenges is getting larger and more pronounced, additional studies on children have been conducted. Data from the National Survey of Children's Health from 2011–2012 (as cited in Lu, 2017) shows that nearly 35 million children experience at least one source of stress. Helen L. Egger and Adrian Angold (2006) find that children between the ages of two and five experience at least one type of severe stressor in their lifetime. Researchers and mental health professionals are concerned about the high numbers of children experiencing at least one stressful situation but are even more concerned about those experiencing multiple stressors. According to Salvatore Terrasi and Patricia Crain de Galarce (2017), "Children who live in a consistently dysfunctional environment often manifest symptoms of what has become known as *complex trauma*, which is the cumulative effect of traumatic experiences that are repeated or prolonged over time" (p. 36).

### Limited Resources Available to Teachers

While there are many books and resources available to help teachers improve their instructional strategies, there are few resources to help teachers to understand and impact trauma. In many cases, teachers are told to do their best or be understanding when instructional strategies are not enough. Teachers are also focused on the academic achievement of *all* students and don't have the time or training necessary to provide the counseling some students need to cope with their traumatic situations.

In this book, we share research-based and classroom-proven practices that can help establish and maintain a classroom environment that not only helps students experiencing trauma be successful but also all students.

## Overview of This Book

This book focuses on helping you understand the impact of trauma and how you can refine your classroom to minimize its impact. It includes some foundational information to assist you in understanding the background of trauma and also contains practical, time-tested strategies to help you establish a classroom environment that is sensitive and trauma informed. By *trauma informed*, we mean keeping the

needs of trauma-impacted students at the forefront of your planning and decision making. Considering trauma-impacted students will help ensure that your classroom provides a safe environment to help students deal with the immediate impacts of trauma while building resilience to better handle future trauma in their lives.

This book offers practical strategies you can immediately implement in your classroom, along with real-world scenarios describing how teachers face and deal with trauma-impacted students and their families. Although these scenarios are based on real situations, people's and schools' names have been changed to protect their privacy. Skip around and feel free to read and learn about those ideas you think will be most beneficial to your classroom, your students, and your teaching. You may choose to start in the middle of the book, at the end, or anywhere else most beneficial to you. Some of the activities and strategies may require sequential steps for implementation, while others may not. Choose what's best for you.

As you find promising ideas and strategies, examine them and how they could fit into your existing practices. If you can look at what you're already doing and refine those practices, you'll find changing to become trauma informed will be an easier journey. The new ideas will be more natural and easier to implement.

When you begin to tackle major changes in your practice, be sure you understand each change and how it will help your students experience success. You may want to invite other colleagues to go on the journey with you. After all, there's motivation in numbers. Then develop a plan for these major changes that includes follow-up support and coaching. As you implement these new strategies, you may encounter periodic setbacks. While setbacks are normal, they can be discouraging and slow down your progress. Don't get discouraged, as change always takes time.

The chapters in this book are designed to provide a step-by-step process for understanding ourselves as educators, childhood trauma and its impact on mental health, and strategies to positively impact students in your classroom. Following is an overview of the information you will find in each chapter.

- **Chapter 1: The Impact of Trauma on Educators and Students—** Chapter 1 presents a concise but important overview of the presence and impact of traumatic situations, including how trauma impacts the brain. This information will help you develop a mindset for the situations you face and provide a rationale for convincing you, colleagues, administrators, and students' parents why you are making

changes in your classroom. The rationale, and understanding the importance of your work, will help keep you moving forward when you face setbacks and challenges while implementing new techniques and strategies.

- **Chapter 2: The Importance of Attitude and Mindset in Working With Trauma**—Thinking about what some students face and selecting an attitude in working with trauma-impacted students is crucial to your success in helping them. In this chapter, you'll examine strategies and techniques you can use to ensure you have a positive and helpful mindset and attitude.
- **Chapter 3: Classroom Structures to Support Trauma-Sensitive Practices**—The first place you'll want to start your work is providing a safe and nurturing, yet structured, learning environment. This chapter shows how you can create a classroom environment and culture to serve as the foundation for your success in working with trauma and mental health issues.
- **Chapter 4: Positive Relationships With Students**—Sound, meaningful, and appropriate relationships are another base or foundation for success with students experiencing trauma. Many of these students lack the important relationships they need for good personal mental health because of their traumatic situations. In this chapter, you'll learn how to build these important relationships.
- **Chapter 5: Trauma-Sensitive Classroom Management Strategies and Techniques**—Teachers sometimes see the effects of trauma play out in disruptive behaviors in their classrooms. Students experiencing trauma don't always respond positively to traditional authoritarian management strategies. Students do respond to strategies that maximize consistency, which helps them learn how to identify triggers that may set off misbehavior. They also benefit from learning how to develop good behavior habits that help them get their needs met. In this chapter, you'll learn how to implement classroom management systems that reduce confrontation and build good learning behavior habits.



- **Chapter 6: Parent and Family Engagement**—The family that might be causing the traumatic situation is also the family that is key to working positively with the student. Building a supportive and trusting relationship with students' families not only helps you understand the situation but it may also help you influence part of that environment to make it more stable for the student. In this chapter, you'll learn a variety of productive ways to build partnerships with students' families so you can work together to ensure student success.

As you move forward on your journey working with trauma-impacted students, we hope the chapters in this book will provide positive and productive strategies you can be comfortable and confident implementing in your classroom. This journey may take some time, but it will be productive time as you improve the lives of your students and move them toward success both inside and outside of the classroom.