

# Trauma-informed Teaching in the Classroom:

## High-leverage Instructional Practices

### Introduction

The good news is that increasingly classroom teachers are becoming trauma-aware through both pre-service training as well as in-service professional development programs. However, the next logical challenge is how do we translate this awareness in to our actual instructional practices ... or teaching behaviors ... in the classroom? What are referred to as “Tier One”, “Universal Preventive” or “High-leverage” approaches are the instructional practices that are directly within our sphere of influence in our classrooms. Consistent implementation of these types of practices can serve as a protective factor for our students and can help to mitigate the negative effects of exposure to adverse childhood experiences. This brief resource has been developed with the aforementioned in mind ... and can serve as a basic guide for us as teachers concerning those things that are directly within our ability to influence on a daily basis. While consistent use of these practice alone may not be fully sufficient to meet the needs of those students navigating serious mental health challenges, these practices will prove beneficial for your students as well as provide a trauma-informed foundation for those students in need of advanced tier supports. The following four-cornerstones of prevention along with the additional aligned trauma-informed classroom practices highlighted are not intended to be exhaustive nor are the descriptions provided comprehensive. However, they do provide a roadmap toward a trauma-informed classroom. We have also embedded a hyperlink to a *Grab & Go Trauma-informed Resource* at the end of this brief guide that provides greater depth regarding the four cornerstone preventive practices as well as the aligned re-direction procedures. The following highlighted practices directly align with the trauma-informed values promoted by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.



### Four Cornerstones of Trauma-informed Classroom Practice

Rapport Building ... with Emphasis on Those that Appear Hardest to Reach

The most essential protective factor for our students is that of connection with others, and in particular, with trusted adults. Rapport is a term with which all of us as teachers are familiar. However, building sufficient levels of rapport is not always easily achieved with each and every student. Those at greatest risk in this regard often times are those students that have had challenging life-experiences that present themselves through undesired behaviors... both externalizing behaviors (acting-out) or withdrawn behaviors (acting-inward). Rapport is based on trust... and there are explicit ways to build trust with all students ... including those that are navigating mental health challenges. Check out the hyperlink to our Grab & Go Trauma-informed Resources to learn more.

#### Clarity of Expectations Reflecting Social Emotional Learning Coupled with Pre-correction

It is essential to establish clear expectations in order to operate a safe classroom learning environment. To this end, it is important to establish expectations that reflect safe and orderly actions with all students. However, it becomes even more effective when within those behavioral expectations we incorporate caring about the wellbeing about others. This positions us to address necessary compliance-types of behaviors while also fostering citizenship. Further, the use of what are referred to as pre-correction procedures increases the likelihood of students meeting the established expectations. Check out the hyperlink to our Grab & Go Trauma-informed Resources to learn more.

#### Positive Reinforcement Achieving a 4 to 1 Ratio ... Whole Class and Individually

Practical experience coupled with decades of research clearly indicates the best way to build desired behavior is by recognizing students in a behavior-specific manner when they demonstrate those expected behaviors. Acknowledging and reinforcing pro-social skills is an essential practice in your trauma-informed classroom. More specifically, it is important to reinforce desired behavior more frequently ... in comparison ... to redirecting a student for undesired behavior. Achieving, at a minimum, a 4 to 1 ratio is the key in your classroom with your entire class (whole-group) as well as with each individual student. Check out the hyperlink to our Grab & Go Trauma-informed Resources to learn more.

#### Depth and Breadth of Opportunities to Respond (OTRs)

Engaging your students constructively in the curriculum and your associated learning activities is pathway to student achievement as well as effective classroom management. There are many different ways in which this can be accomplished through OTRs. These approaches tend to reflect the actions we take with our students in the form of prompting responses verbally (say), in writing, as well as in action (do). The key is in finding the proverbial sweet spot...or balance ... in terms in both how often (frequency) and variety (breadth) of OTRs you deliver throughout instruction. Check out the hyperlink to our Grab & Go Trauma-informed Resources to learn more.

#### **Additional Aligned Trauma-informed Practices**

##### Effective Use of Physical Space

Provide sufficient personal space in seating as well activities that will occur throughout the day. Consciously plan for student movement during transitions as well as while students are working within their assigned area (e.g., allow for periodic physical movement within each's student personal space). Provide to the degree feasible access to equipment and materials that students will need throughout the day. Be sure to address mobility issues for students that require accommodations (e.g., a student

utilizing a wheelchair or walker) as well as provide additional space where warranted (e.g., para-educators, peer-mentors, interpreters). Also, where feasible, provide for student proactive access to a calming space within the classroom.

### Establishing Predictable Routines

Provide visual displays of the scheduled routines that occur throughout the school-day. Align the established expectations that concurrently reflect SEL with these routines. Depending on your students, it may be necessary to take more complex routines that involve multiple steps (e.g., arrival and departure from the classroom) and break those routines down through task-analyses into memorable, finite steps to enhance student success. Once established, regularly provide pre-corrections in advance coupled with positive reinforcement throughout the established routines (e.g., at the start of the day and/or at the beginning of an instructional block of time such as a class period). Be sure to provide initial direct instruction in the established routines and re-teach the routines as needed based on student performance throughout the year.

### Actively Supervising Students

Being mobile and observant is an essential component in a trauma-informed classroom. Regularly scan and circulate during instruction as well as during transitions. Check-in with students as you circulate providing behavior-specific praise and pre-corrections to promote desired behavior. Increase your pro-active interactions with students that require more frequent reinforcement and pre-correction throughout traditional as well as virtual instruction.

### Incorporating Brain Breaks

The value of providing Brain Breaks for your students is not limited to providing brief fun activities as a form of respite that is unrelated to the curriculum being covered at that moment in time. The greater benefit is that Brain Breaks provide an opportunity to incorporate mindfulness in concert with related activities that help students to increasingly focus and be in-the-moment. By switching activity to different networks within the brain you allow the resting neural pathways to restore their calm focus and helps to foster optimal mood, attention, and memory. The promotion of Brain Breaks is based in neuroscience and in particular the concept of neuroplasticity. Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to change and adapt in response to new experiences and stimuli and serves an umbrella term referring to the brain's ability to change, reorganize, and grow new neural networks.

### Teaching Students about their Brain & Stress Response System

In alignment with the previously noted neuroscience behind Brain Breaks, it is helpful to proactively provide basic instruction about the upper (thinking) part of the brain (Cerebral Cortex) and the lower reactive (emotional) parts of the brain (Brain Stem, Mid-brain, and Limbic). Relatedly, teaching students how each of these areas in their brain is affected when they experience stress is encouraged. Further, teaching students actual self-calming strategies that are effective for them, as individuals, to self-regulate the reactive (emotional) parts of their brain when they are feeling fearful, angry or upset will help your students to increasingly manage their own behavior. Being able to self-regulate one's own behavior is a valuable skill while at school, as well as at home and in the community. Teaching self-regulation is not only beneficial to your students, but also has relevance for us as teachers to lower the chances of over-reactions to lower-level nuisance types of behavior.

### Redirecting Undesired Behavior

The first step in redirecting undesired behavior is to determine if the student's behavior of concern is nuisance-level or problem-level. Nuisance-level behavior should be systematically ignored while concurrently reinforcing other students in proximity engaging in desired behavior and then reinforcing the student of concern once they engage in the desired behavior (e.g., on-task behavior). Problem-level behavior, on the other hand, requires direct intervention. When redirecting a student engaging in problem-level behavior it is most important to self-regulate your own behavior to achieve the desired result ... that being to de-escalate the immediate situation. Trauma-informed redirection involves three sequenced steps: 1) communicating with the student to stop engaging in the problem behavior (e.g., "stop screaming", "stop grabbing materials", "stop pushing"), then 2) redirect the student to a desired alternative behavior (e.g., "use your calming techniques"), then and once the student appears calm, you can add additional alternative behaviors as relevant (e.g., "return to your seat"), and then 3) provide behavior specific praise to the student for following your redirection.

### **Grab & Go Trauma-informed Resources for Teachers:**

<https://www.commonwealthu.edu/offices-directory/mcdowell-institute>