

## Season 2 Episode 2: Trauma Informed Teaching Tips

Transcribed by Alexis Pinkerton

Dr. Dave Barry: How's everybody doing this week? Ooof – it has been a chaotic couple of weeks in America and I'm definitely feeling the weight of it. I'll begin this episode by saying that the opinions expressed are my own. Though I typically begin mini-episodes by reading a Spotify or Apple Podcasts comment from a listener, I don't feel like promoting the show is a message I want to deliver this week – I do really appreciate y'all's comments, 5-star ratings, and sharing the show with friends, but the purpose of this episode is to share some things you can do in your classroom to support students who may be experiencing trauma or potentially traumatic events as a direct result of the unfathomable hatred and bigotry being spewed by the current administration. I've been a teacher for nearly 20 years now, and with that comes some bravery to speak truth to power. If you are new to teaching, that can be a lot harder. After I rant by sharing actual facts with you based on actual research – I'm going to share some things you can do in your classroom today or tomorrow if you are listening to this at night to make it feel safer for students whose families and they themselves are being targeted by this administration.

It's hard to stay optimistic and positive about school when I add up the heartless actions this administration has taken in the last two weeks against immigrant families with ICE raids, against health experts being stopped from sharing important information about diseases, against prek programs like Head Start that provide low-income children in the United States with access to education, food, and a safe place to go during the day while their families work. How anyone could toy with the wellbeing of another human – especially a child – speaks volumes about their character. I do a lot of my work in Head Start programs – I see teachers loving their young students with their whole hearts and how much these young children get out of the opportunity to be in school – beyond just basic needs. Reckless sweeping and illegal executive orders that go against congress like this one have the potential take food, care, and basic needs from children, children that I know –how can anyone be ok with this? Though the spending freeze has been reversed thanks to a federal judge, it shows a willingness to toy with the safety and security of children and it's inhuman. Full stop.

The latest executive order I read is called "Ending Radical Indoctrination on K-12 Schooling" which, according to the news source THEM– and if you don't follow the news source THEM on I recommend that you check Them out., - according to THEM this order is an attempt to require Departments of Education, Defense, and Health and Human Services to submit an "ending indoctrination strategy" within 90 days. This is another attack blatant on trans folks and anti-racist education and all part of the current administrations anti-woke stance.

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Let's be clear about something – when queer kids and children of color see themselves reflected in the curriculum at school, they do better in school and life – you can fact check me on this in a report by the American Public health association. They found “Schools with LGBTQ-affirming learning environments report fewer student absences and larger improvements in academic achievement across multiple grade levels. Queer students in LGBTQ-supportive schools attempt suicide at lower rates than their peers attending non-affirming schools.”

According to the American Psychological Association, diversity education in fact benefits all children, regardless of their race, gender or sexual orientation. They wrote “In contrast to the view that addressing topics such as privilege and systemic inequity is harmful, research shows that experience with these issues leads to positive changes in students’ attitudes and values (Gurin et al., 2002). An inclusive classroom also provides global academic benefits, such as improved critical thinking (Bowman, 2010) and higher overall achievement levels for both majority and minority group members (Elicker et al., 2009). In addition, when students have positive diversity experiences, their interest in improving the lives of people in their communities increases (Bowman, 2011).” In other words, being anti-woke means being against critical thinking, being against student achievement for all students, and being opposed to the idea that children would want to improve the lives of others.

No one has to like that these research findings are true – but they are. Also true is that if a white child reads a book where a black character is treated unfairly and it makes the white child feel sad, we should be thrilled that that child is exhibiting empathy. Another truth is that a book can't change a person's sexuality or gender identity – if that were true, there wouldn't be any queer people who are millennials and older because we just didn't have access to books with lgbtqia characters growing up. We're gay because we're gay – not because a kind teacher shared a book with us that had a character like us in it. What these resources do for children is affirm their humanity and their right to exist – the only way they change non-queer identifying people is by opening their mind to the myriads of identities and experiences that exist beyond their own. To shut that down is hateful ignorance – plain and simple.

To the full extent that we are able as teachers, we need to do what we can to be there for our kids right now. I'm privileged to have this podcasting platform, that I'm white, that I'm cis-gender and that I've been working in the education field for a long time. I know there are teachers – maybe even listening – that are feeling powerless right now. What I share next comes

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from my expertise on trauma informed teaching – things I've learned from experience that you can do to make your classroom a safe and healing space for any child being targeted by hate and bigotry. I began studying the impact of trauma on children as a graduate student at the Harvard graduate school of education and continued studying trauma's impact as a teaching fellow for 5 years at the Harvard graduate school of education. At any opportunity, I share these recommendations with teachers who are striving to do right by their students in the face of seemingly impossible odds. I hope what I share today is helpful to you.

The three things we can provide in our classrooms – no matter the grade level or subject – are safety, predictability, and opportunities for choice. Because trauma is the loss of safety, is often unpredictable, and in many instances involves a person or event taking choice away from a person, our classrooms must provide the opposite – safety, predictability, and choice.

Teachers can create consistent routines in their classrooms and have predictable schedules as a way to make children feel safe. For example, always using the same song when it's time to transition to the next activity. Posting the daily schedule also helps children know what's coming next during the day. Something I would do as a kindergarten teacher was post the next day's schedule at the end of the previous day – that way, children would go home that night and come in the next day knowing what to expect from school. I also recommend giving children time warnings for when one activity will end, and another will start.

It's important to note that the majority of behavior problems that teachers report are the same behaviors responses a child demonstrates when they've experienced a trauma – withdrawing, acting out, not being able to control emotions, behaviors, and impulses, having a hard time connecting to teachers and classmates, inattention, aggression, just to name a few. Seeing these behaviors doesn't mean a child is traumatized, but realizing how similar a trauma reaction and misbehavior are can help teachers see beyond behavior to try to understand the root cause without being punitive.

Predictability is incredibly helpful for behavior management – having clear behavior expectations with already established rewards and natural consequences gives children some agency over their behavior choices. It also makes messing up less scary for kids because they know how their teacher will react. I used to do something called "Step 1, Step 2, and Step 3." I've been blessed with a giant wrinkle between my eyebrows that gives me a very animated face – when I scrunch my eyebrows, the wrinkle gets really deep and obvious – this is what I called my "step 1 face" – I'd make it when a misbehavior was starting and point to the wrinkle and say "oh my

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friends, this is my step 1 face – what can we do to help me get back to step 0?” Usually that would be enough, but sometimes we’d need to go to “Step 2” – step 2 is the same as step 1 with the addition of my hands on my hips – if my kindergarteners were continuing to act up, I would “say, oh I’m not at step 1 anymore, I’m at step 2 – do you see my eyebrow wrinkle? Do you see where my hands are?” usually at this point the kids would say “he’s making the step 2 face!” and get their acts together. In rare instances, Mr. Barry got to step 3 – eyebrow wrinkle, hands on hips and a somewhat louder voice – usually due to the fact that whatever was happening with their behavior was loud and I needed them to hear me. These three steps were my way of teaching them the expectations in a clear way – behavior is just like any other skill – would you punish a kid who got a math question wrong? I hope not – I hope you’d take the time to teach them so they’d learn from the mistake – and I hope that behavior issues can be thought about in the same way.

The last thing I wanted to share is giving kids opportunities for choice – as many as you can. As I said, a traumatic experience usually involves the person’s choices being taken from them by someone or something. I used a choice chart in my classroom for students to select activities they wanted to engage in throughout the day all related to the content being taught – it allowed me to ensure they were learning what they needed to, but in a way that gave them choices about how they learned. If you are working in school with a rigid curriculum – try to find small opportunities for choice. Can your students pick the writing utensil to use? Or can they pick the order in which they complete the worksheets they need to complete? Truly, any small opportunity for choice makes a difference in my experience.

Beyond those, I have a few more specific tips I’ll share too – 1) if you can have a place for kids to go in your classroom to step away when they need to, it makes a huge difference. I had an igloo tent from IKEA that one of my student teachers dubbed the “cool down igloo” that was full of pillows, stuffed animals, and books about feelings. Kids could go there whenever they needed for as long as they needed to. I know some teachers worry about how to manage something like that – and yes, I’ll admit for the first two weeks the cool down igloo is annoying and everyone wants to go in it – but by week 3, the novelty wears off and kids only use it when they need it. If you try this out, please don’t put restrictions on when they can use it – I understand that there are must-dos in nearly every classroom, but getting into a punitive power struggle with a student who needs a break over a worksheet isn’t worth the damage it will do to your relationship with that child.

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I also love bubbles – they help children slow their breathing and actually see a visual representation of their breath encased in a bubble, which is really cool when you think about it. There's also a phenomenon called the diving reflex that happens when the face is cooled with water – doing this can drop an accelerated heart rate of a child in fight-or-flight mode by 10-30%. Don't go splashing your kids with water, but do let them go to the bathroom to splash cool water on their face. I've also had a lot of success reducing a student's anxiety or fear by asking them questions I know they have memorized – something about recalling stored information interferes with the intrusive thoughts and can quickly help calm a child. I'd ask questions like "what's your sister's name again?" "What's the third letter in your name?" to try to help a distressed child and it's amazing how quickly and how often this works and how often it works.

I'll leave you with a final thought for this mini episode - You will likely never know the full extent of a child's trauma – you don't need to know in order to provide a safe, predictable learning environment. These recommendations are good for any student – all of your students regardless of who they are and what they've experienced deserve a safe and a predictable environment with opportunities for choice and this can really help with that.

If you're interested in learning more about trauma informed teaching or about the studies I reference in this mini-episode, I'll share them on my website – just click the Season 2 Episode 2 icon on the episodes page at [istillbelieveinschool.com](http://istillbelieveinschool.com).

Do come back for a listen next week, I'll be joined by my friend Leanne Switzer who I taught kindergarten with for many years in Boston. You won't want to miss it. Until then, take care of yourself and take care of each other. Bye y'all.