



Informing & Inspiring New Teachers

a publication of Kappa Delta Pi

Volume 28, No. 2

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ISSN 1070-7379 is published four times during the school year by Kappa Delta Pi, 3707 Woodview Trace, Indianapolis, IN 46268-1158.

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▶ STUDENTS IN CRISIS



INFORMED AND EQUIPPED: 7 WAYS TO BUILD YOUR TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE CLASSROOM

By Mallory Lee Bricker and Shanda Alison Jones

With the first day of school, feelings of optimism and excitement usually come to mind. Unfortunately, as fall 2020 approached, our first days were filled with more uneasy unknowns than happy hustle and bustle.

We've all seen students who have experienced trauma before in our classrooms, but the 2020–2021 school year may see our largest number yet. Considering the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial unrest of America's spring and summer months, what can we do to guide our students through this uncertain time? We offer seven trauma-informed strategies you can implement throughout the school year.

- 1. Say their name.** Trauma-affected students often don't feel safe or seen in the classroom, which causes them to have problems creating, sustaining, or developing strong relationships (Brunzell et al., 2015, p. 67). Learning and using students' names shows that you care about them and their success, and helps them develop a sense of trust. When a student begins to trust and see you as a caregiver and your room as a safe space, the learning can begin.
- 2. Put it in writing.** Work together as a class to build a list of behavioral norms and expecta-

tions. Students who have experienced trauma frequently approach school with fear. Creating a culture based on positive relationships and interactions will take time and consistent adherence to positive expectations (Sporleder & Forbes, 2016).

- 3. Resist the urge to react.** Students with traumatic experiences may be triggered to respond to a situation in a way that seems out of proportion. Rather than reprimands and consequences, show your commitment to working with them (Craig, 2017). You might acknowledge a frustrated student's emotion and offer a break with the promise of returning to the issue when they're able.
- 4. Empower their effort.** Not every child has experienced or embraced a growth mindset. Praising effort rather than intelligence reinforces the idea that students have the power, perseverance, and attitude to influence and improve their academic outcomes (Brown et al., 2014). Commit to affirmations of hard work, persistence, and commitment to learning.

Positive interactions will help you make sure your students, especially those with a traumatic history, feel safe and are successful.

- 5. Play to their strengths.** Your classroom may be your students' first experience in hearing something positive about themselves. Help them identify their strengths and refer to them often as you encourage effort and build a positive relationship (Zacarian et al., 2017).
- 6. Eliminate the unknown.** When students know there aren't going to be any surprises in your room, they can relax. "Part of the reaction to childhood trauma is this uncertainty that looms over each day" (Watson, n.d.). Following a consistent agenda each day in your classroom eases their minds. Structure and predictability help counteract feelings of being on high alert.
- 7. Model respect.** When you, as the teacher, model respect toward peers and authority figures, students will be able to mirror your actions and show respect as well.
 - Consistently provide positive feedback to students. Use positive, respectful language, even in tough situations.
 - Respect personal space; refrain from touching. Instead, use smiles or nods to show encouragement and communication.
 - Model an appropriate child–adult relationship by establishing sound behavioral boundaries and adhering to them consistently (South Eastern Centre Against Sexual Assault & Family Violence, n.d.).

As we cautiously make our way through the 2020–2021 school year, we will need to be the best we can for our students, our colleagues, and ourselves. So many of the young faces we see daily went months without consistent, positive interactions. Implementing these practices will help you make sure your students, especially those with a traumatic history, feel safe and are successful. 🍏

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Mallory Lee Bricker is a high school math teacher and instructional coach in Marshville, North Carolina. She's pursuing her doctoral degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Gardner–Webb University. She is researching the effects instructional coaching has on teacher perception and practice when working with trauma-affected students.

Shanda Alison Jones is an English Language Arts teacher in Spartanburg, South Carolina, and a doctoral candidate at Gardner–Webb University. She is actively working toward integrating trauma-informed strategies and literacy instruction.

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