

SEL

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## 6 Trauma-Informed Strategies for Helping Students Succeed Amid COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and wide-reaching effect on students, from the quality and nature of the instruction they have received to their social and emotional well-being. Whether students are attending school in person or continuing with remote learning, K-12 leaders need to plan for how they will address not only students' academic needs but their social-emotional needs as well.

Many children have been seeing or hearing frightening information about the pandemic on TV or online. Some may have family members or other people they know who have gotten sick or even passed away as a result of the coronavirus. These experiences, and even just the anxiety that comes from not knowing what the future will bring, may result in feelings of grief or trauma.

Students who are experiencing these strong emotional responses may have difficulty focusing on their schoolwork or completing lessons. They may feel hopeless or depressed. They might need opportunities to regain a sense of confidence and personal safety, or they might need help with self-regulation. Trauma-informed care and other trauma-sensitive teaching strategies might help.

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) has **issued guidance** on how K-12 educators and administrators can implement trauma-informed approaches to help students cope during the pandemic. Based on this guidance, as well as **recommendations from the American Occupational Therapy Association** (AOTA), here are six key strategies that schools might consider.

### **Establish clear routines.**

Making activities and routines as predictable as possible helps students feel more secure in their environment. It gives them something they can count on, reducing the sense of helplessness they might feel at the random nature of events.

For instance, educators might have students who are working remotely log in at 9 a.m. for a morning meeting each day. They might give assignments in the same predictable manner. When providing instructions, it's important to communicate these clearly and break them down into smaller chunks when necessary, so that students don't become overwhelmed.

Of course, even the best-laid plans may go awry. If you have to break from an established routine, take the time to explain these changes and why they're necessary. Explain that there may be future changes to routines as well, and that you'll communicate these ahead of time if you can. **Child psychologists say** that doing this “will reduce stress and increase (students’) confidence that important adults in their lives are capable of taking care of them.”

## **Give students opportunities for control.**

Allowing students to make choices — in where to sit, how they'll complete a task, or what method they'll use to demonstrate their understanding (write a poem, make a video, create a picture book) — is not only a sound instructional practice that follows Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles for meeting the needs of all learners. It also gives students opportunities to regain control in their lives, which is another way to reduce the sense of helplessness they might be feeling. It enables them to feel like a valued and welcome member of a learning community.

## **Focus on building relationships.**

While it's important to make sure students have structure and to continue holding them to high standards, “students will fare best if they know their teachers care about their well-being just as much as their behavior and assignment compliance,” child psychologists observe.

Be flexible and empathetic when it comes to holding students accountable. “Show appreciation for students' efforts to complete assignments,” NCTSN advises. “Remember that students may be dealing with many different home life situations while trying to maintain their academics. Students may feel embarrassed to share that their personal situation impacts their ability to complete assignments. They may also be feeling vulnerable sharing their home with their classmates online.”

Educators can show students they care by connecting on a personal level before asking about assignments. For example, “students and educators can share one tough moment and one hopeful moment of the day, or educators and students can share one new lesson they learned about themselves during the day,” psychologists suggest. “Participating in these (rituals) can help educators build and maintain connection” even when students are learning from home.

And speaking of connection, fostering a sense of connectedness between students, their teacher, and their peers is a critical strategy for helping students cope with trauma. If students are learning remotely, schedule time for live web conferencing sessions that allow students to see, hear, and interact with each other and their teacher. Incorporate fun activities into online or in-person lessons. Have students work on activities together in groups using online collaboration tools — and highlight each student’s contributions to group activities.

## **Create a sense of security and hope.**

The COVID-19 pandemic is challenging students’ sense of security, raising concerns about food and job security and whether children and their families will remain safe from physical harm. However, there are steps that educators can take to mitigate these concerns.

For instance, educators can suggest that families and caregivers avoid watching the news in front of young children and maintain as much of a regular family routine as possible. In addition, educators can encourage students to connect with them or another trusted adult to talk about their feelings. Give students a safe space for reaching out if there’s anything they need help with or are worried about.

Students may also be struggling to maintain hope, or the belief that everything will turn out okay. To foster a sense of hope among students, educators can share inspirational stories that have emerged from the current pandemic and other crises; teach about other troubling times in history and how communities rebounded; have students ask someone in their family or community how he or she maintains hope during periods of crisis; and share positive affirmations of students’ strengths and the things they’re grateful for that day.

## **Build intrinsic self-regulation skills.**

As children learn to understand and manage their own emotions, they’re able to respond more effectively to complex or intense emotions such as anger, anxiety, grief, or loss. Equipping students with practical self-regulation strategies can help them deal with these feelings and maintain control without becoming overwhelmed.

For instance, mindfulness exercises such as meditation, visualization, or deep breathing can help students calm and re-center themselves, so they’re more prepared to learn. **Spending time in a sensory room** may also help students control their emotions.

A calming sensory room offers a quiet space to regroup, which might help students manage their responses to stress or anxiety. [link to SEL article #1?] A sensorimotor space, or “wobble room,” on the other hand, provides opportunities for gross motor movement. [link to SEL article #2?] It’s an active space where students are encouraged to move, play, and explore using a variety of sensory

activities, including opportunities for vestibular input (movement), tactile input (touch), and proprioceptive input (deep touch pressure and heavy work).

While all students need to move throughout the school day, those with certain sensory processing challenges or difficulty self-regulating need to move more frequently — and **research** supports the idea that frequent movement might actually help these children focus and manage their emotions more effectively, leading to better learning. Educators can find ideas for designing and equipping both types of sensory rooms [here](#).

## Watch for students who may need professional help.

Even if educators employ all of these strategies, there may be some students who need additional help in coping with their emotions during the pandemic, such as professional counseling or mental health services. These might include children who have a documented history of trauma, anxiety, or depression; those whose families have lost their jobs or income; and those who've lost a loved one to COVID-19 or who have family members who are particularly vulnerable to the virus.

Educators should pay close attention to their students' emotional well-being and should coordinate with school mental health experts or community-based organizations specializing in trauma if they suspect that students might need further assistance.

“Note any changes in students' behavior,” NCTSN recommends. “For example, is a student acting more tired or listless than normal, or having more difficulty concentrating? Is a child who is usually relatively focused now unable to stay with one train of thought? Does a normally social child seem more withdrawn? These may be normal reactions to the change in environment and the current circumstances, or they may warrant further assessment by a mental health professional.”

The COVID-19 pandemic is emotionally challenging for all of us, and students are especially at risk. Incorporating trauma-informed strategies like these may help students learn to cope with their emotions more effectively — while also connecting those who need additional support with the professional services they require.

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### About the Author

*Cecilia Cruse, MS. OTR/L received her BS degree in Occupational Therapy from the University of Florida, and her Master's degree in Education from Georgia State University. She is SIPT (Sensory Integration & Praxis Test) certified and has over 30 years' experience in pediatrics with school-based services (including pre-school and Head Start programs) acute care and outpatient pediatric settings. She has authored several articles for professional periodicals and magazines and has served as a trainer/consultant and service provider in several school systems. Cecilia is*

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