



Q&A: Why Trauma-Sensitive Teaching Matters Even More In 2021



As students return to school and cope with a worldwide pandemic, trauma-sensitive teaching will be more important than ever.

This month, students and teachers across the country are returning to classrooms amid an ongoing pandemic. Many have spent the past year dealing with illness, economic hardship, virtual and disrupted learning, racial unrest and more. Some have lost parents, caregivers or loved ones.

Tish Jennings is a professor at the University of Virginia's School of Education and Human Development and an expert on teacher stress, mindfulness and social-emotional learning. In 2018, Jennings published a book on [the trauma-sensitive classroom](https://www.norton.com/books/9780393711868/about-the-book)

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We caught up with Jennings to talk about how trauma-sensitive practices can help students adjust to the classroom this fall – and set the foundation for a successful, enriching school year.

Q. Can you explain how trauma affects learning and academic achievement?

A. When any of us are dealing with trauma, we prioritize our survival. It's a built-in biological reaction to situations where our lives are threatened in some way or another.

For example, if you're living through dangerous circumstances, you can become hyper-attuned to threat around you all the time, so you can protect yourself. We call that hyper-vigilance. And that's problematic for children when they're trying to learn, because if their attention is constantly directed toward preventing anything threatening, they can't focus their attention on academic tasks

– especially those tasks that require a deep, focused attention, like reading or math, that requires working memory.



Tish Jennings is an expert on teacher stress, mindfulness and social-emotional learning and has published a book on the trauma-sensitive classroom. (Photo by Dan Addison, University Communications)

The other one that's common is something called dissociation. It's basically emotionally shutting down because whatever the person is dealing with is too difficult to actually process. That can take a lot of different forms, but with younger kids, the common thing is looking dazed, spaced-out or depressed. If you're dissociating, you're not following what's going on around you. A teacher may call on a student to answer a question, and they will be completely lost.

Depending on the child, it can also go along with behavioral problems. For example, if you've been exposed to a lot of hostility growing up, you may over-interpret behavior as hostile. So if I'm a kid with this tendency walking down the hall and somebody bumps into me accidentally, my first thought might be that they're trying to hurt me and I might lash out without thinking. I'm overreacting to any situation that I think is threatening, and I'm interpreting other people's behaviors as threatening even when they're not.

Q. What exactly is trauma-informed or trauma-sensitive teaching?

A. The term "trauma-informed" comes from the clinical world; people who work in clinical psychology use that term when it comes to treatment approaches. "Trauma-sensitive" is mostly used in schools and other applied settings, where it's more about the everyday processes that should be sensitive to the needs of traumatized folks.

There are processes we can do in schools that are good for everybody that are trauma-sensitive – they provide a sense of safety. That's the No. 1 thing. Everybody feels safe, everybody feels accepted. Everybody's identity and needs are recognized and honored, and everybody is valued for what they

have to contribute. All that is the foundation of trauma-sensitive teaching.

Q. You published your book on the trauma-sensitive classroom in 2018. How have the events of the past year or two affected your thoughts on trauma-informed teaching?

A. Back then, when I was exploring this issue, I realized that trauma-sensitive work has to be employed at the universal level – for everyone. A lot of time in schools, we have these tiered approaches with certain interventions for the general population and different interventions for kids who are identified with special needs. However, it's really hard for adults in school settings to know whether or not a kid has had traumatic experiences, so it's really hard to identify them and target them specifically. Parents often tell their children not to talk about these problems with anyone outside the family. There's a lot of stigma in our culture around trauma, and parents and kids worry that they will be separated if people learn what is going on at home. This adds a layer of difficulty.

I saw pretty clearly in 2018 that everybody needs to understand how to create these environments that will help kids who are exposed to trauma. Since COVID, it's just become more and more obvious that this is the case. Now so many more

people are experiencing trauma – from COVID, from the results of COVID and the tangential effects.

The other thing that became clear to me when I was working on the book, and is even more clear now, is that trauma is defined by the person experiencing it. Depending on the resources you have to draw upon as an individual, an experience can be more or less traumatic. And how you identify that experience is what counts. I don't think we, as observers of another person, can tell what they're going through – depending on the situation, something can have a horrible impact on one person and not such a bad impact on another person.

Q. How would you describe the unique role that teachers can play for their students who are dealing with trauma? In other words, what abilities and limitations do teachers have to address trauma in their students?

A. First of all, I think it's really important for teachers that the whole school recognize that the system needs to be trauma-sensitive. It can't all land on the teacher's shoulders – they can't do it without support. For example, the principal, social workers and any other mental health professionals who work in schools need to be available for teachers. They need to have systems in place and

back-up systems so that when teachers do need help, they know where to get it.

That said, there's a lot teachers can do to support kids. Once they recognize these symptoms and understand what students are going through, they can reinforce that feeling of safety over and over again. That's something they may need to do a lot – be attuned to when a student is not feeling safe and stepping in and helping them see what's actually going on in the situation. Giving them extra time and help self-regulating.

For example, let's say I need an eraser in the other room. My tendency as a teacher might be to choose the one kid I know I can count on, but it might actually make more sense to choose the little girl who's disassociated over there – to give her a task to show her that I trust her to do something important, and that she has something to contribute that's valuable. Little things like that.

So I think it's about being sensitive, being responsive, recognizing the perspective of the kids, building that sense of safety, and working with the rest of the staff in the school to find approaches that work best for those kids.

Q. What do school leaders need to know in order to best support both teachers and students – academically as well as socially and emotionally – during the return to classrooms this fall?

A. Before COVID, teachers were already stressed to the limit. Many of them have their own trauma histories as well. It creates a very complex intersection of their own trauma, the system and the stress they're dealing with, students who are also experiencing trauma, and then having to adapt to COVID on top of that – the pressure of these many layers of stress have been compounded by COVID. Also, teachers are still being held accountable for their students' outcomes.

Right now, I think we all need to take a pause from those kinds of expectations. It's going to take time for all of us to recover, and for districts to expect kids to get back on track right away is unrealistic. And could be harmful, actually, to put that kind of additional pressure on teachers while they're trying to recover the social-emotional climate of their classroom and build these support structures and feelings of connection.

That takes some time and effort, and if you try to skip over that and just start diving into academic content, you're going to lose half the class right away. Because how to be in school, we see now, is so much more about social interactions and the community that you build than the academic content. The academic content is important, but it relies on this social foundation that has to be created and cultivated.

Q. What advice would you give to teachers about how to take care of themselves as they approach this coming school year?

A. I think the first is really prioritizing self-care. I know a lot of people talk about self-care and it's become a buzzword, but being able to take time to examine what their needs are and how to fulfill those needs has to be a priority for teachers. Because if their needs are not met, their stress level will impact their teaching. We know that. And I can't say it's all up to the teachers to manage their stress; administrators need to know that, too – there are a lot of structural factors in the school that cause stress that could also be eliminated or removed from teachers to help them as well. But self-care is something we all need to spend time on, and I think in some ways, COVID has clarified that.

The other thing that I think teachers can do is to learn how to recognize the signals of the stress that they're feeling. Mindfulness can really help with that, because when you practice mindful awareness, you start to notice sensations in your body more. For example, if I'm starting to feel anxious or frustrated, my shoulders might creep up, or my jaw might start to tense, or I might start feeling warm, and those signals give me the message: "Ok, I'm feeling stressed. I need to take a couple of breaths."

I think slowing down, noticing and being more aware of our stress and intentionally calming ourselves down will really help. When a situation arises in a classroom, teachers are the adult in the room, so they need to be the one to start the de-escalation process. If they start noticing tension arising in themselves or a student, it's about giving space for that and taking some time to calm down. Don't try to rush into solving a problem immediately.

Q. What would you say to people who are concerned about learning losses and students' ability to rebound from the pandemic?

A. Kids are incredibly resilient when given the support they need. When I was a new teacher, I worked for a while in a psychiatric ward with kids who were severely traumatized. One of them was a 4-year-old who barely had any language. He had basically spent his first few years of life in a crib with nothing – severe neglect. I worked with him every day for an hour or two, starting with building a relationship so he would trust me. We would read stories, play games, do those kinds of things. As soon as we started building this relationship, his speech started to improve. Then he started learning the alphabet. He learned so quickly that he was almost up to the average 4-year-old by the time I left. I was just astounded by how quickly a child can learn once they recover and they have a

person who cares about them and spends time with them.

Of course, most of our students aren't that severely damaged. So I think if we do this preliminary community-building first, we'll see that kids will learn quickly and catch up quickly. If school leaders have faith in kids, and faith in this process, they will see results. It may take some time, but they will catch up. And we will maybe have better systems that actually address the needs of kids better.

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