

How to Help Students Dealing with Adversity



Education researcher Patricia Jennings explains how teachers can effectively support traumatized kids in their classrooms.

BY PATRICIA JENNINGS | JANUARY 17, 2019



Six-year-old Jada feels a persistent expectation of danger. She overreacts to provocative situations and has difficulty managing her emotions, which often flare up without warning. To her teachers, Jada appears touchy, temperamental, and aggressive. She is easily frustrated, which makes her susceptible to bullying. When something happens at school that triggers Jada, she may lash out in fury.



How can teachers manage a kid like Jada who may have suffered trauma, but whose emotional reactions make it difficult for her to learn? Not by getting angry, for sure. That would just trigger her, because she's hypersensitive to criticism.

In my new book, *The Trauma-Sensitive Classroom*, I present key, alternative strategies teachers and schools can use to help kids who've experienced trauma to do better in school. I've found that when teachers recognize the symptoms of trauma, build supportive relationships and classroom environments, and build upon strengths to help traumatized kids learn self-regulation, they can play an important role in helping them heal.

How can teachers do that while still managing a roomful of other kids? It can feel overwhelming to contemplate, but many of the strategies are useful no matter who is in your classroom. And, as long as you couple them with care for your own well-being, they are certainly worth the effort.

Here are some of the suggestions I make in my book.

1. Build supportive relationships in the classroom

As human beings, the most important factor for our survival is supportive relationships. But trauma and adversity can disrupt the development of the important bonds that children need to reach their full potential. Fragmented families and communities make it harder for children and teens to find attachment figures to connect with, leaving many kids unmoored.

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To support children and teens exposed to trauma and adversity, we can demonstrate alternative working models of relationships by building social trust. While a warm and supportive classroom environment is beneficial to all students, for students exposed to trauma and adversity, it's a necessity. Teachers can make efforts to get to know each student individually, their strengths and challenges. They can pay special attention to the classroom social network, promote positive peer relationships, and teach and reinforce

kindness and respect, while avoiding competitive situations that create social hierarchies.

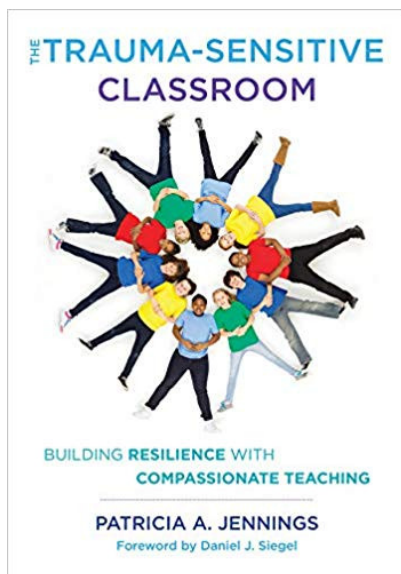
Teachers can build relationships with students by practicing a mind shift—one that focuses on students’ strengths rather than their weaknesses. Instead of asking yourself, “What’s wrong with him?” when a student exhibits difficulties, ask yourself, “What happened to him and how did he learn to adapt to it?” Reframing in this way will help you to understand where he is coming from and how best to help him.

It’s best not to ask students who’ve misbehaved, “Why did you do that?”—because their behavior may be as perplexing to them as it may be to you! Educators need to understand that exposure to trauma often impairs self-awareness, self-regulation, and perspective taking, which interferes with these students’ ability to understand or explain reasons for their behavior.

If teachers can move away from blame, and provide warmth, empathy, and a respect for students’ strengths, it will go a long way toward building positive relationships in the classroom.

2. Create safe spaces

Effective treatment of complex trauma requires coordinated community systems that can effectively identify, treat, and provide support for children, teens, and families. The first order of business in building a trauma-sensitive school is creating a safe environment for all concerned.



This essay was adapted from *The Trauma-Sensitive Classroom: Building Resilience with Compassionate Teaching*, with the permission of the publisher, W. W. Norton & Company.

What does that mean? It means that all students feel protected by and connected to their teachers and the school community, and that rules for the students are always fair, made with their needs in mind.

At the classroom level, teachers can help build safety by creating fair, logical rules that are consistently reinforced. For children exposed to trauma, this is particularly important, because they come from homes where rules may be associated with arbitrariness and severe punishment. It may help to use the word “expectations” rather than “rules” to communicate with students in a way that is less likely to trigger them.

Since children exposed to trauma often feel powerless around what’s happening in their lives, having them participate in creating classroom rules, and giving them choices and alternatives when making assignments, can help empower them. However, it’s important not to lower your academic expectations. I have witnessed teachers give trauma-exposed students a coloring worksheet as an alternative to a math assignment out of fear that the assignment might trigger an outburst. While offering alternative assignments may be helpful at times, the alternatives must give the student an appropriate opportunity to learn the same material.

What can teachers do when students act out? While you must always address behavior that disrupts the learning process, it’s important not to rupture the students’ connection with the school community. Exclusionary policies, such as suspension and expulsion, only reinforce students’ feelings of rejection and low self-worth.

Instead, give students the opportunity to calm down by de-escalating the situation. Recognize that such behavior may be adaptive in their home environment and they may need support to learn adaptive strategies that are

appropriate for the school environment. Alternative strategies include inviting the student to take some “time in” to settle and calm down, either in the classroom “peace corner” or in a “resilience room,” a place set up to give students space to self-regulate at their own pace.

3. Build upon strengths by supporting self-regulation

Hypervigilance, hyperarousal, and a tendency to disassociate—these are all ways students who’ve been exposed to traumatic environments try to adapt. Unfortunately, while being adaptive in some stressful environments, they can interfere with a student’s ability to focus their attention on schoolwork.

To support students exposed to trauma and adversity, teachers can help them learn to understand and manage their emotions better—both directly and indirectly. For example, you can monitor your students for signs of hyperarousal and use soothing talk to help them calm down. You can also teach calming strategies such as simple mindful awareness and relaxation practices, which help all students to deal with difficult feelings. Having a meditation or compassion-based practice yourself prepares you to teach practices to students and maintain your own resilience at the same time.

Be careful to avoid situations that are confusing, chaotic, or erratic. If these situations do arise, try to prepare these children in advance. Here is an example of how this might be done:

Let's say that you learn of an upcoming fire drill, and you fear that it will set off a student. While all students deserve a warning, you can give special support to a student who may be particularly frightened. Taking her aside during early morning recess and explaining what will happen can help avert a meltdown. Also, asking the student to take a leadership role—perhaps leading the other students as you walk out of the classroom—gives her a chance to feel empowered in the situation. Giving her a last warning just before the fire drill happens and preparing for her special role can help her to build some self-confidence.

Exposure to trauma and adversity during childhood and adolescence has a significant impact on a child's development, often interfering with learning and social and emotional functioning. While children may have learned to cope with a stressful environment in adaptive ways, their coping strategies can pose challenges to learning in school environments, especially if schools are not employing trauma-sensitive practices.

Schools can play an important role in helping students heal by recognizing and building upon their strengths and by building supportive relationships, creating safe and caring learning environments, and supporting their development of self-regulation. This requires adults who are committed to caring for themselves first, so they have the resilience to be compassionate in their teaching.

While this is not always an easy task, I believe that the benefits in terms of improved school climate and student learning are well worth the effort. Long-term, the benefits to our students and society may be immeasurable.

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Patricia (Tish) Jennings, Ph.D., is an internationally recognized leader in the fields of social and emotional learning and mindfulness in education. A teacher and teacher trainer by background, she is now a member of the National Academy of Sciences Committee on Fostering Healthy Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Development among Children and Youth, and has authored numerous peer-reviewed studies on student engagement, classroom management, and teacher well-being.
