

12 Things You'll Find in Trauma-Sensitive Classrooms

by Susan Ciminelli, Executive Director of White Waves Education Consulting



1. Positive Teacher-Student Relationships – Teachers who understand anxiety and trauma know that building a positive relationship with *each* child is essential to creating an emotionally-safe learning environment. They see individual students, not a class or group of children. Trauma-sensitive teachers don't define who a child is by a label. Trauma-informed teachers have frequent, one-to-one, rapport-building conversations with each child. Through conversations, teachers discover a child's interests and the child learns that the teacher cares about him as a person. Paying attention and truly listening to a child helps form a bond of trust. Teachers who are highly skilled at building rapport don't leave trust-building and connecting to happenstance, they plan and actively work to build rapport with each student.

2. Emotionally-Safe Learning Environment – Children with anxiety may also have behaviors that require intervention from the teacher. A well-trained trauma-informed teacher addresses acting-out and other disruptive, even disrespectful behaviors without relying on time outs, angry reactions, shaming, or punishment. Skilled teachers know how to plan for, manage, and monitor emotional states with the activities and interactions with students in every lesson. In a trauma-sensitive classroom, students are taught what is expected and how to respond when safety, either physical or emotional, is in jeopardy. Most of all, trauma-sensitive teachers know that the most important factor in helping students feel safe is when students perceive the teacher, herself is safe to be with.



3. Established Routines, Seamless Transitions – Some of the most difficult times for children are transitions between activities and unanticipated changes in routines. Preparing children to understand the schedule and activities of the day helps to allay anxiety. Just as good teachers prepare children how to respond to fire drills and remain calm, trauma-informed teachers understand that preparation is key to reducing anxiety generated by changes in the routines. The key is to teach the students what they are doing for each transition. Teachers anticipate "what if" situations the students may find themselves in, then discuss these with their students. Most anxiety stems from the

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unknown. By bringing “what if” examples to light and offering alternative responses helps children be less uncertain and fearful and become more pragmatic in their response to the unexpected. Trauma-informed teachers also understand that they themselves must be predictable in their own behaviors and how they respond to the children they teach. Equanimity is the hallmark of a trauma-informed teacher.

4. Self-Regulation & Coping Skills are Taught – Students learn coping and self-regulation skills by observing adults and their skills. In my workshops, I remind



teachers that they may be the only self-regulated adult that child with trauma knows. With so few examples of self-regulated adults in the lives of children who have had adverse childhood experiences, trauma-informed teachers realize that children are unlikely to know the behaviors we expect nor how to self-regulate. Children must be taught the behaviors and the skills in order to successfully carry them out. Trauma-informed teachers also teach students the means

in which to restore their own emotional equilibrium. Teaching children to recognize one’s emotional and physical state and use coping skills to regain self-control can greatly reduce anxiety for a child.

5. The Teacher is Calm, Flexible, and Resilient

For some children, their trauma stems from a difficult relationship with a demanding, inflexible, punitive, and unpredictable parent, foster parent or guardian. A child with this type of parent is always in fear of making a mistake or displeasing this adult. When compliance is paramount at home, AND in the classroom, a child is caught in-between in an either/or situation. The trauma-informed teacher understands that a child’s “home” work may be difficult and provide other reasonable alternative means for completing assignments. These teachers are aware of family dynamics and are also careful not to rely on family interaction as a requirement for a homework assignment. When a child’s behavior must be addressed, a calm conversation without an audience of peers helps to reveal what the child’s underlying thinking was at the time of the incident. Instead of asking “what’s wrong with you?” the trauma-sensitive teacher will ask a student “what happened to you?” to get at the heart of the student’s thinking and what triggered their behavior.



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6. Positive, Specific Feedback for Every Student

Our human brains are hard-wired to seek out flaws. Add to that the teacher's role to correct student errors and behaviors and schools can be a double-whammy of negative thinking. This is why stickers, class charts and other incentives are so ineffective for most students. Trauma-sensitive instructors know the importance of positive feedback for students, but also understand that a child with trauma tends to have "black and white, all or nothing" thinking and a lot of negative self-talk. It's tricky for a teacher to

correct errors

AND provide

positive feedback

when working

with a child who

has a negative

self-image. For

most of us self-

regulated adults,

we can consciously

disrupt this

negative thinking

and focus on the

positive. For

children with

anxiety or who

have been

traumatized by abuse, they generally have a higher

level of rumination and negative self-talk. Providing specific, individualized, positive feedback is one of the best interventions to counteract Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANTS) provided the teacher knows the child internal belief system.

There's no way around it, frequent individual conversations listening to the child is the best way to learn how the child thinks about himself and understand his view of the world around him.



7. Humor

It is said the shortest distance between two people is a smile. Sharing a humorous moment both with the entire class and with individual students is a great way to release anxiety. Obviously humor used is always appropriate and never at someone else's expense. There is never any sarcasm in a trauma-informed classroom.

Teachers who model a cheerful, light-hearted, optimistic outlook throughout the school day do a great service to their students who soon gravitate to the same outlook. Trauma-sensitive teachers don't leave humor to chance, they PLAN humor into their lessons and interactions with students.

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8. Students Set Goals and Monitor Self-Progress

Empowering students and providing the means for a child to monitor their own progress is one of the best ways to build self-confidence, perseverance, and hope. Nearly every child in his or her early years has felt this exhilaration at least once and exclaimed, "Look what I can do!" The toddler feels a sense of power and accomplishment as they successfully climb the stairs, stack a tower of blocks, or dress themselves for the first time. For traumatized or anxious children, they have fewer moments of achievement and more negative assumptions about their abilities. As they grow older, they tend to view every mistake or failure as confirmation that they are inadequate. Teachers understand the importance of setting goals appropriate for each child, but how do teachers encourage the traumatized child with a negative self-image? Trauma-sensitive teachers build into instruction ways for students to monitor their own progress. Trauma-sensitive teachers guide students to define appropriate goals for themselves and provide the support and practice needed to help these students succeed. Students in trauma-informed classrooms have a clear idea how well they are doing because they can see exactly what they have achieved and what their next steps will be.



9. Social-Emotional Skills Are Taught

Children learn their social-emotional skills from watching others. For children living in difficult home situations, they may learn social-emotional responses that are not helpful to them, and have a number of lagging skills related to social interaction, empathy, and other age appropriate behaviors. Trauma-sensitive teachers remember that just like reading or math, social-emotional skills are learned, not innate. Students who have been traumatized or are anxious often have difficult interacting with their peers. Trauma-Sensitive teachers don't leave SEL to chance or to peers, but have a clearly defined understanding of the SEL skills children need and a variety of ways



and opportunities to teach these skills. Trauma-Sensitive teachers consider social-emotional development part of their everyday work with children. When a student

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has behavior issues, Trauma-Sensitive teachers recognize the behavior as a lagging skill and seek to address the child's thinking or needs rather than merely applying a punishment. Trauma-Sensitive teachers understand that punitive measures are not at all likely to resolve the underlying issue the child has.



10. An Attitude of Gratitude

The Greater Good is an organization focused on research and the impact of our frame of mind and outlook on life. Their research tells us that the common factor in people who don't give up when the way becomes difficult and can easily recover from adversity is an attitude of gratitude. In a trauma-informed classroom, there is a focus on looking for the good things and taking the time to appreciate these more fully. Trauma-sensitive teachers structure their

students' experiences to include a moment to reflect on what went well as a daily routine.

11. Movement

"Sit & Git" is definitely not a learning staple for instruction in a trauma-sensitive classroom. Planned movement activities are an essential part of learning success in a trauma-sensitive classroom. These activities can range from musical dance breaks, stretches, moving to a different area of the room, or structured motions as a part of a lesson. Trauma-sensitive teachers understand the brain research and emotional benefits of incorporating movement into classroom instruction. Movement is essential to managing student's mental states, increasing focus, engagement, and concentration, incorporating opportunities for positive social interaction with peers, and releasing stress and anxiety.



12. Opportunities for Peer Interaction

One of our most basic human needs is to belong and feel accepted by others. Trauma-sensitive teachers find ways to allow students to work together and form social bonds. They also plan whole-class activities like morning meeting or seasonal

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celebrations that give students a sense of family. Research shows that talking with someone about what you are learning helps cement the learning into the memory. Research also shows that isolation and lack of human interaction has a detrimental effect on the human psyche. Trauma-sensitive teachers ensure every child has someone to sit with at lunch and checks in with new students who transfer in mid-year and may need help being assimilated into the new school.

A Trauma-informed teacher has

- **fewer behavior referrals,**
- **better student engagement, and**
- **improved academic performance.**

It may seem from this list that one must be super-human to “add” these to the tall order of meeting all the curriculum goals in a school year. The fact is, the list is not necessarily “adding” tasks, but utilizing the time allotted more efficiently and reducing the distractions and time-wasters that interfere with delivery of instruction and student learning and increase the burden of addressing problems.

Participants in my workshops become proficient in managing and planning all the transitions and student time outside of teacher-delivered instruction. Moreover, by changing student skill-building from a worksheet to interactive, non-computer skill building and charting progress, teachers free up time otherwise spent correcting worksheets to allow them time to conference with individual students on their progress.

Most of all, through training in Trauma-Sensitive Practices, teachers are empowered to make bigger gains with those students whose academic performance is adversely affected by trauma.

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With growing numbers of students impacted by trauma and anxiety in our classrooms, it becomes imperative that teachers learn to work smarter, not harder. If we don't teach with trauma-sensitive knowledge and techniques, the children who depend on us to make a difference in their lives, will never conquer their fears, realize their potential, or have a fulfilling, purposeful life.



I urge every teacher to step up and be the hero our children need. Step up and learn how to be the life-changing mentor who diverts the sad trajectory of hopelessness and despair. Be the person who ensures we have a better tomorrow.

Sign up for training with White Waves Education Consulting and give yourself the gift of empowerment to be the best teacher you can be.

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The teacher is able to gather more data without the additional work because the students are recording their own data. Struggling learners monitor their own progress and can see for themselves how much they are able to achieve. This is a powerful way to help students with a negative self-image to change their own thinking and foster hope and a positive mindset toward learning.

- Give students the patient, understanding, and effective teacher they deserve.
- Reduce your own stress and workload and experience daily fulfillment and joy in your work and your students.

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