



Address Trauma With Calm, Consistent Care

Strategies to help educators avoid burnout
while keeping students learning-ready.

By Pete Hall and Kristin Souers

Students thrive when they arrive at school ready to learn, enthusiastic about the day, and free from distracting external stressors. The truth is, however, that more often than we think, students arrive at school feeling the effects of trauma, which can impact not only their own learning experiences, but also the entire school culture. Schools must intervene as an equalizer, offering the much-needed balance that can ensure that students are learning-ready.

Trauma—according to Daniel J. Siegel, clinical professor of psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine—refers to “an experience that overwhelms our ability to cope.” These overwhelming experiences, such as loss of a loved one, parental discord or divorce, homelessness, bullying, or even frequent moves, are also known as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). ACEs can take multiple forms, from single events such as witnessing a crime, to ongoing situations or multiple occurrences such as living with a mentally ill parent or having an incarcerated family member (also known as complex trauma).

When children lose the ability to cope with the traumatic events in their lives, they seek ways to regulate. They access whatever resources they have—healthy or unhealthy—to manage the intensity associated with the stress of these events. Often, this manifests in struggles with the ABCs: attendance, behavior, and coursework. A landmark study conducted by Christopher

Blodgett, who directs the Area Health Education Center at Washington State University, proves the impact of ACE scores on school experiences. According to the study, children who experienced three or more ACEs were five times more likely to have attendance issues, six times more likely to have behavior problems, and three times more likely to experience academic failure than their peers with no ACEs.

In an era in which student achievement reigns and we strive to support every child’s academic development, our struggling students—many of whom are trauma-affected—need us more than ever. We can’t always know what students have experienced, or even all the details about it. Neither can we erase traumatic experiences from students’ memories or stop trauma from happening again. But we can work diligently to create an atmosphere that is inviting, welcoming, peaceful, and safe for all our students. We can establish a “trauma-sensitive learning environment.”

One School's Story

Sheridan Elementary School, a Title I school in urban Spokane, Washington, is one site at which a trauma-sensitive learning environment took hold. Digging into the piles of discipline referrals for the 500-student population, then-principal Pete Hall uncovered a startling statistic: Over 100 of the students—20 percent of the student body—had at least one parent who was, or had been recently, incarcerated. This led to a more thorough investigation, which revealed more trauma history for the majority of the school's students. Roughly half of the students had a known trauma history, and nearly 25 percent of the students had an ACE score of two or higher.

With academic achievement lagging, attendance waning, discipline referrals growing, and staff frustration mounting, the school's administration and counseling staff partnered with a local mental health therapist, Kristin Souers, who had begun offering training to school staffs in the Spokane, Wash-

ington, area. Souers worked with the Sheridan Elementary staff (teachers, administrators, counselors, paraprofessionals, custodial staff, and secretarial staff) in a variety of ways, including whole-staff trainings during staff meetings, special after-school workshops, 1:1 conferences and consulting, virtual goal-setting and planning, and classroom visits.

As their understanding of trauma and its effects on students grew, so did staff's understanding of how to nurture a trauma-sensitive learning environment. Souers' lessons centered on the one element of the equation that educators and school personnel *can* control: ourselves.

Identify Motives, Predict Responses

The first step in establishing a trauma-sensitive learning environment is to look beyond challenging behavior in order to identify the motive. Research shows that trauma exposure impacts brain development, mental health, physical health, and the ability of people (not just children) to safely process their reality. Instinctively, children who feel threatened, unsafe, or ill-at-ease will react in one of three ways: flight, fight, or freeze.

When viewed through a trauma-response lens, many of the behaviors that we scold or punish children for exhibiting are natural responses to events of which we have no knowledge. We refer to this as "normal reactions to *not* OK things." We advocate for a deeper understanding of the motivation behind the behaviors. Trauma researchers have studied this stress response for decades. The chart of frequent student misbehaviors on page 17 provides a lens to better understand stress responses.

The next step is for us to orient ourselves in such a manner that we are able to remain calm, consistent, and caring—no matter how our stu-

dents behave. In today's classrooms, student conduct can inevitably interfere with teaching and learning. One might even argue that all schools and classrooms today are susceptible to frequent, intense, and lasting incidents of disruptive behaviors. But, if we can predict it, we can prevent it. The key is to avoid reacting to these infringements with frustration, anger, or irritability because a trusted adult's response to off-kilter behaviors can either escalate or mitigate the surrounding environment. Maintaining balance, perspective, and a calm demeanor conveys a sense of safety to all community members.

Our calmness serves as a model to students of how to self-regulate, reducing the need to remove students from our classrooms. Additionally, understanding the motive behind the behavior will also assist us in designing interventions and strategies aimed at supporting students' regulation and their capacity to enter a learning-ready state.

Two Strategies

In addition to creating plans that address individual students' needs through competency-building, teaching regulation strategies, and building positive relationships, Souers helped the staff construct plans that would address the adults' needs. Just as flight attendants insist that adults affix their oxygen masks before helping others, educators must take care of themselves before they are equipped to truly help their students. Here are two strategies to help educators do that.

1. Stay out of Oz. Children living with chronic stress or who have experienced trauma often have a difficult time regulating their emotions and coping with the day-to-day pressures of growing up. One strategy children often select is to create chaos in their environment. By attempting to manage their stress levels and forge a sense of control over their

Principal ONLINE

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✦ **ACEs Too High** reports on research about adverse childhood experiences.

✦ **The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** provides trauma information and strategies for families, caregivers, and educators.

✦ **The National Child Traumatic Stress Network** offers information, bulletins, and resources to inform and support traumatized children, their families, and communities.

✦ **The Twitter feed** for the book project by Kristin Souers and Pete Hall contains links to articles and resources, informative posts, and motivational messages.

FLIGHT	FIGHT	FREEZE
Withdrawal	Acting out	Numbness
Running out of the classroom	Aggression	Refusal to answer
Daydreaming	Refusal and defiance	Refusal to get needs met
Appearance of sleeping	Silliness	Giving a blank look
Avoidance of others	Hyperactivity	Inability to move or act
Hiding or wandering	Argumentative	Answering "I don't know"

stay focused and avoid professional burnout. Cement shoes represent an educator’s guiding principles, purpose, and mission statement. Phrased in “I believe...” or “I will always...” or “I can...” or “I love...” language, this series of statements direct and affirm the work you do, the decisions you make, and the manner in which you conduct yourself. They keep you grounded and safe, even in the midst of today’s education tsunami.

Answer these questions to help develop your own cement shoes: What is my mission statement? Why did I get into education as a profession? Why do I stay in this field? The answers to these questions—your cement shoes—will keep you grounded.

Taking Action

As our students experience more ACEs, the detrimental effects on their academic progress add up. As educators, we can neither erase the trauma nor ignore its impact. We must take action.

Establishing and nurturing a trauma-sensitive learning environment offers safety for our trauma-affected students, their peers, and everyone else in the school setting. By viewing students’ behavior through a lens of motivation or need, educators can determine a course of action that enables our children to process, regulate, and make sense of their reality. With information, intentional training, and deliberate focus, we can create a safe, predictable, and positive environment that facilitates teaching and learning. 

Pete Hall, a former award-winning school principal, is a speaker, education consultant, and author.

Kristin Souers is a licensed mental health therapist who trains education professionals in the nuances of trauma-sensitive practice.

surroundings, they might cause great tumult in their classrooms.

As adults, we sometimes spin ourselves into a tornado—or we find ourselves joining our students in their tornadoes—when we’re faced with a child acting out, having a tantrum, tormenting others, or otherwise exploding in the classroom.

On the surface, we see the behaviors: a student screaming, throwing papers, cursing, or somehow disrupting the learning environment. These behaviors are not acceptable and we cannot allow them. If we react to these behaviors by yelling, making comments (“This is why you’re failing this class,” or “That’s a childish way of acting,” for instance), engaging in arguments, and eventually casting the offending students out of the classroom, we have allowed the tornado to cart us off to Oz.

Educators must maintain an even keel during this storm. Just because a child has chosen a disruptive regulation strategy doesn’t mean we need to hop on board. When we stay calm, we can more effectively view the incident through the lens of motivation. Educators should ask: What problem is this

child attempting to solve? Is there a need this child is attempting to meet? Has this child been triggered in some way and creating a diversion to manage that trigger? When we analyze the motivation, we can empathize with the student’s plight, talk the student down off the proverbial ledge, offer alternative strategies for self-regulation, and maintain order in the classroom.

Many teachers repeat “Stay out of Oz” as a mantra. Others create clever posters that hang on their classroom walls as reminders. Some use journaling to process the events of their day so they can identify trends and write a game plan for responding calmly.

2. Wear cement shoes. Educators are under constant barrage of stressful situations. Public accountability demands, high-stakes testing, new teacher evaluation systems, and Common Core standards can take their toll. Add to that list the “vicarious trauma” or “compassion fatigue” that educators often experience, and the result can feel like a series of waves pounding you as you stand in the surf on the beach.

Instead of toppling, educators must put on “cement shoes” so that they can