

Dennis-Yarmouth Regional School District

Instructional Office Newsletter

10 Things About Childhood Trauma Every Teacher Needs to Know

For children who have experienced trauma, learning can be a big struggle.



With grief, sadness is obvious. With trauma, the symptoms can go largely unrecognized because it shows up looking like other problems: frustration; acting out; difficulty concentrating, following directions, or working in a group. Often students are misdiagnosed with anxiety, behavior disorders, or attention disorders rather than understood to have trauma that's driving those symptoms and reactions. For children who have experienced trauma, learning can be a big struggle. But once trauma is identified as the root of the behavior, we can adapt our approach to help kids cope when they're at school. Starr Commonwealth Chief Clinical Officer Dr. Caelan Soma offers these tips for understanding kids who have been through trauma plus strategies for helping them.

1. Kids who have experienced trauma aren't trying to push your buttons.

If a child is having trouble with transitions or turning in a folder at the beginning of the day, remember that children may be distracted because of a situation at home that is causing them to worry.

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January 2020

Volume 7, Issue # 5

IMPORTANT DATES

January 1 st	New Year's Day (No School)	
January 2	School Re-Opens	
January 17	District Professional Development Day	
January 20	Martin Luther King, Jr. Day (No School)	
January 25	Chinese New Year (Year of the Rat)	

IMPORTANT NOTICE:

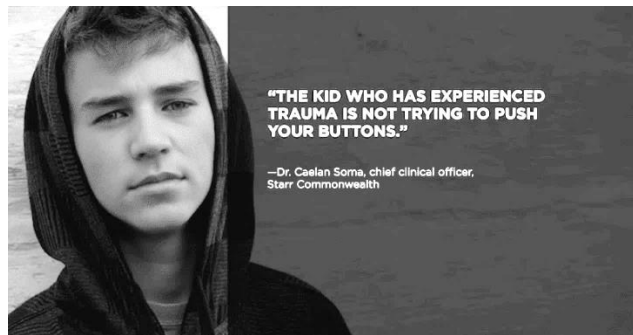
Central office is a **fragrance-free zone** so please be respectful and plan accordingly when you visit.

Due to one of our members at the CO being highly sensitive to any type of fragrance, we ask that staff visiting/meeting at the Administration building **refrain from using any scented products**. Fragrances from personal care products, air fresheners, laundry and other cleaning products have been associated with adversely affecting a person's health. We ask that we all work together to make the environment a safe and healthy workplace for everyone.



Thank you very much for your cooperation!

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Instead of reprimanding children for being late or forgetting homework, be affirming and accommodating by establishing a visual cue or verbal reminder to help that child. **“Switch your mind-set and remember the kid who has experienced trauma is not trying to push your buttons,”** says Soma.

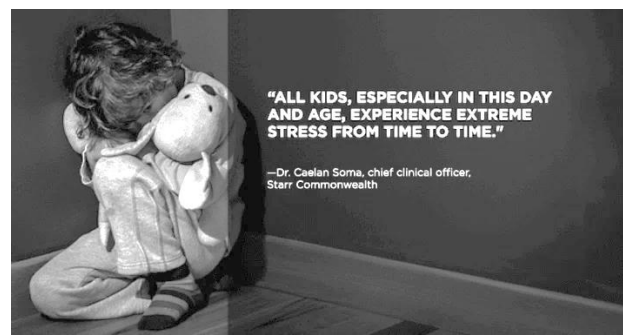
2. Kids who have been through trauma worry about what’s going to happen next.

A daily routine in the classroom can be calming, so try to provide structure and predictability whenever possible. Since words may not sink in for children who go through trauma, they need other sensory cues, says Soma. Besides explaining how the day will unfold, have signs or a storyboard that shows which activity—math, reading, lunch, recess, etc.—the class will do and when.

3. Even if the situation doesn’t seem that bad to you, it’s how the child feels that matters.

Try not to judge the trauma. As caring teachers, we may unintentionally project that a situation isn’t really that bad, but how the child feels about the stress is what matters most. “We have to remember it’s the perception of the child. [...] The situation is something they have no control over, feeling that their life or safety is at risk,” says Soma. It may not even be just one event but the culmination of chronic stress—for example, a child who lives in poverty may worry about the family being able to pay rent on time, keep their jobs, or have enough food. Those ongoing stressors can cause trauma. **“Anything that keeps our nervous system activated for longer than four to six weeks is defined as post-traumatic stress,”** says Soma.

4. Trauma isn’t always associated with violence.



Trauma is often associated with violence, but kids can also suffer trauma from a variety of situations—like divorce, a move, or being overscheduled or bullied. “All kids, especially in this day and age, experience extreme stress from time to time,” says Soma. “It is more common than we think.”

5. You don’t need to know exactly what caused the trauma to be able to help.

Instead of focusing on the specifics of a traumatic situation, concentrate on the support you can give children who are suffering. “Stick with what you are seeing now—the hurt, the anger, the worry,” Soma says, rather than getting every detail of the child’s story. Privacy is a big issue in working with students suffering from trauma, and schools often have a confidentiality protocol that teachers must follow. You don’t have to dig deep into the trauma to be able to effectively respond with empathy and flexibility.

6. Kids who experience trauma need to feel they’re good at something and can influence the world.

Find opportunities that allow kids to set and achieve goals, and they’ll feel a sense of mastery and control, suggests Soma. Assign them jobs in the classroom that they can do well or let them be a peer helper to someone else. “It is very empowering,” says Soma. “Set them up to succeed and keep that bar in the zone where you know they are able to accomplish it and move forward.” Rather than saying a student is good at math, find experiences to let them *feel* it. Because trauma is such a sensory experience, kids need more than encouragement—they need to feel

their worth through concrete tasks.

7. There's a direct connection between stress and learning.



When kids are stressed, it's tough for them to learn. Create a safe, accepting environment in your classroom by letting children know you understand their situation and support them. "Kids who have experienced trauma have difficulty learning unless they feel safe and supported," says Soma. **"The more the teacher can do to make the child less anxious and have the child focus on the task at hand, the better the performance you are going to see out of that child. There is a direct connection between lowering stress and academic outcomes."**

8. Self-regulation can be a major challenge for students suffering from trauma.

Some kids with trauma are growing up with emotionally unavailable parents and haven't learned to self-soothe, so they may develop distracting behaviors and have trouble staying focused for long periods. To help them cope, schedule regular brain breaks. Tell the class at the beginning of the day when there will be breaks—for free time, to play a game, or to stretch. "If you build it in before the behavior gets out of whack, you set the child up for success," says Soma. A child may be able to make it through a 20-minute block of work if it's understood there will be a break to recharge before the next task.

9. It's OK to ask kids point-blank what you can do to help them make it through the day.

For all students with trauma, you can ask them directly what you can do to help. They may ask to

listen to music with headphones or put their head on their desk for a few minutes. Soma says, "We have to step back and ask them, 'How can I help? Is there something I can do to make you feel even a little bit better?'"

10. You can support kids with trauma even when they're outside your classroom.

Loop in the larger school. Share trauma-informed strategies with all staff, from bus drivers to parent volunteers to crossing guards. Remind everyone: "The child is not his or her behavior," says Soma. "Typically there is something underneath that driving that to happen, so be sensitive. Ask yourself, 'I wonder what's going on with that kid?' rather than saying, 'What's wrong with the kid?' That's a huge shift in the way we view kids."

Learn More About Childhood Trauma

You can also check out our video [What Every Teacher Needs to Know About Childhood Trauma](#) or one of Starr Commonwealth's professional development courses for teachers [Trauma-Informed Resilient Schools](#).

Thomas Guskey on Grades and Comments

"Are comments on student work superior to grades?" asks assessment guru Thomas Guskey (University of Louisville/University of Kentucky) in this article in *Phi Delta Kappan*. "It depends... The research on this issue is far more complicated and more highly nuanced than most writers acknowledge." Guskey cites several studies that provide helpful guidance for K-12 educators.



- **A 1958 study by psychologist Ellis Page** – Secondary-school teachers gave numerical scores on their students' assessments and then converted the scores into A, B, C, D, F grades. Three randomly-selected groups of students then got their papers back with:

- ✚ Numerical and letter grades only;
- ✚ Numerical, letter grades, and standard comments for each grade: A: Excellent! Keep it up. B: Good work. Keep at it. C: Perhaps try to do still better? D: Let's bring this up. And F: Let's raise this grade!
- ✚ Numerical score, letter grade, and individual comments based on each teacher's personal reactions and instructional priorities.

Page compared the impact of these three approaches by looking at how students did on their very next assessment. Here's what he found: students in the first group did no better; students in the second group did significantly better than those in the first; and students in the third group did better still. The conclusion (which has been confirmed by subsequent studies): grades are helpful only if they're accompanied by teachers' comments.

What's striking about this study is that the standard, boilerplate comments given to the second group of students had such a positive impact. The comments involved very little work for teachers, but made almost as much difference as the much more time-consuming individualized comments given to the third group of students. Guskey believes a little-recognized insight from Page's study is the *nature* of the standard comments. **First**, each of these seemingly robotic comments communicated the teacher's high expectations and the importance of students' continued effort. **Second**, all the comments made clear that the teacher was on students' side and willing to partner with them to improve. Instead of saying *You must raise this grade*, the comment was *Let's raise this grade!* – conveying, *I'm with you in this, we can do it!* In other words, says Guskey, "The message teachers communicate in their comments may be what matters most."

• **Benjamin Bloom's mastery learning** – In the late 1960s and 1970s, Bloom promoted the idea that on

formative assessments, students should receive a grade of *Mastery* or *Not Mastery*. Bloom defined Mastery as the clearly described level of performance that teachers believe would deserve an A, which then becomes the standard of mastery for *all* students. Students scoring below Mastery on formative assessments are in a temporary state, *not there yet*, and should receive diagnostic and prescriptive instruction from the teacher and additional chances to demonstrate mastery. Bloom believed that with sufficient time and skillful corrective instruction, 95 percent of students can achieve Mastery. In short, Bloom believed in comments to guide under-par performance to mastery grades, guided by clear expectations up front.

• **Ruth Butler's 1988 study** – Fifth and sixth graders took a test and were then divided into three groups, each receiving a different type of feedback:

- ✚ Grades from 40 to 99 based on students' relative standing in the class (norm-referenced or competitive grades);
- ✚ Individual comments on students' performance on the objective (criterion-referenced or task-focused);
- ✚ Both competitive grades and task-oriented individual comments.



The study found that students in the second group did best, indicating that competitive grading is not an effective practice, and task-focused comments can boost learning by giving students specific information on their performance and suggestions for improvement. What's interesting is that the competitive-grades approach *benefited* high-performing students, maintaining their interest and

motivation, while undermining the interest and motivation of low-performing students.

Guskey adds that the nature of the comments is the key factor. In Butler's study, they were task-oriented and instructionally helpful. Additional research by John Hattie and Helen Timperley reinforces the idea that it's the *quality, nature, and content of teachers' comments that make a difference*.

- **Guskey's conclusions – First**, he says, grades – whether they are letters, numbers, symbols, words, or phrases – are not inherently good or bad: “They are simply labels attached to different levels of student performance that describe in an abbreviated fashion how well students performed.”

Second, grades should always be based on learning criteria that the teacher has clearly spelled out. Grades



that compare students to their peers do not move learning forward. In fact, says Guskey, “Such competition is detrimental to relationships between students and has profound negative effects on

the motivation of low-ranked students, as the results from the Butler (1988) study clearly show.”

Third, assessments must be well-designed, meaningful, and authentic, and grades should reliably and accurately measure the learning goals and provide useful information to guide teachers and students to improve learning.

Fourth, grades by themselves are not helpful. “Grades help enhance achievement and foster learning progress,” says Guskey, “*only* when they are paired with individualized comments that offer guidance and direction for improvement.” And of course those comments must be followed up with time and support for students to improve their work.

Fifth, students and families must understand that grades don't reflect *who* students are, but their

temporary location on the learning journey. “Knowing where you are is essential to understanding where you need to go in order to improve,” says Guskey. This metacognitive awareness also makes students better judges of their own work and increasingly self-sufficient as learners.

Finally, Guskey sums up the collective wisdom of researchers, especially Benjamin Bloom and his colleagues, on effective comments on students' tests, essays, products, performances, or demonstrations:

**What Is Feedback,
and Why Is It So Important?**

- ✚ Always begin with what the student did well, recognizing accomplishments or progress.
- ✚ Identify the areas that need improvement.
- ✚ Offer specific guidance on steps the student needs to take to meet the learning criteria.
- ✚ Communicate confidence in the student's ability to achieve at the highest level.

“Grades Versus Comments: Research on Student Feedback” by Thomas Guskey in *Phi Delta Kappan*, November 2019 (Vol. 101, #3, pp. 42-47), available at <https://bit.ly/2P3DSnW> for PDK members, or for purchase; Guskey can be reached at guskey@uky.edu.

Teacher-Led versus Student-Centered Classrooms: Either-Or?

In this chapter in *The ResearchED Guide to Education Myths*, British educator/writer Tom Sherrington addresses the widespread belief that teacher-led instruction and student-centered learning are opposites. Looking at schools in this way, one polarity is command and control: quiet classrooms; the teacher is responsible for what students need to learn; instruction is focused on subject-area content; failure is seen as a bad thing; learning is shallow and memorized. On the other side is student engagement and empowerment: classrooms are busy, even chaotic;

learners are self-aware and advocate for their own needs; teachers lead, coach, and inspire learners to find passion in the subject matter; failure is recognized as a powerful learning moment; learning is deep and passionate.

group work effective learning vehicles. And good teachers gradually taper off the amount of structure and guidance they give students as they become more proficient and independent.

• **What is the role of student engagement in teacher-led instruction?** “Teachers cannot be said to have undertaken successful instruction unless their students, as individuals, have secured successful learning,” says Sherrington, “and this requires their active involvement, their mental engagement, their conscious effort, and active schema-building... Essentially, effective instruction depends on teachers being guided by their students’ responses; they will adapt, adjust, push on, re-teach, provide more supports, take scaffolds away, give more or less feedback, and follow different lines of reasoning – all driven by students.”

Checking for understanding and fine-tuning instruction in real time is at the heart of good teaching, and is entirely compatible with instruction where the teacher is “in charge.” The ultimate goal, after all, is students who can learn and function on their own – but it’s a myth that independence will emerge in most students without strong and thoughtful teacher guidance. “Teacher-led instruction,” says Sherrington, “formulated with student thinking at its core, is vital to the process – not exclusively, but often predominantly.”

• **Where is the middle ground?** Sherrington believes that every curriculum unit should include an artful blend of teacher-led and student-centered instructional strategies. Some examples:

- **Collaborative learning** – Learning is social, and students benefit from opportunities to work together, airing their ideas, testing hypotheses, and assessing each other’s learning. With teacher structuring and active monitoring, small-group and pair work can be highly productive, “not as vehicles for making



Implicit in the second description is a sharp critique of traditional, teacher-led instruction, but there’s plenty of criticism on the other side: students don’t know enough about the curriculum to make good choices about what to learn; the opportunity costs of inquiry and problem-based learning are too high; student agency is not necessary or relevant in the classroom; and student group work and projects are inherently low-level and ineffective, with students acquiring misconceptions or incomplete and disorganized learning.

Proponents of these opposing camps tend to declare, “It is clear that...” and “The evidence almost uniformly supports...” In this dichotomy, says Sherrington, “the opposition is explicit, unequivocal – and utterly ludicrous... In reality, in a school curriculum that is rich and broad, leading to deep learning, both teacher-led learning and student-centeredness will be woven together, blended and sequenced, integrated in a proportionate manner.” He identifies the common ground by posing three questions:

• **When is teacher-led instruction most and least effective?** Novice learners need firm teacher guidance, says Sherrington, while students who have mastered the basics can work with less explicit guidance. Teacher scaffolding can make projects and

discoveries,” says Sherrington, “but as a means of practicing recently learned content and skills.”

- **Open-ended tasks and projects** – A few times each year, students can benefit enormously from producing a piece of extended writing or engaging in a learning task where the outcome is not predetermined. The key, says Sherrington, is the teacher modeling some elements, determining success criteria, giving feedback, and providing some direct instruction.
- **Co-construction** – Over time, as students gain proficiency and confidence, Sherrington believes students should increasingly make decisions about their learning. “When I hear teachers suggest that students can’t really guide their learning,” he says, “because how could they know enough to do so? – I almost feel sorry for them because it suggests they’ve never met the kind of students that I have who most certainly could. You only have to reflect on your own education to consider when, as a teenager growing up, you started to form legitimate academic interests and preferences; you started asking questions that you wanted answers to; you felt ready to make choices about what to study.” Again, the key is teacher standard-setting, guidance, nudging, directing, and monitoring.
- **Education for citizenship** – There’s certainly a need for direct instruction about government and civics, says Sherrington, but “citizenship is something you do; it’s not just something you learn about... If students don’t develop the sense that their voice matters at school, how are they going to find their voice as citizens in the wider world where the stakes are much higher? Citizenship isn’t hypothetical,

emanating from a knowledge base derived from instruction; it’s lived; experienced. Student-centeredness needs to be woven in.” And that means students debating, expressing opinions, presenting ideas, and organizing themselves and others.

“Myth: Teacher-Led Instruction and Student-Centered Learning Are Opposites” by Tom Sherrington in *The ResearchED Guide to Education Myths* (John Catt, 2019, p. 71-82)

Getting the Most Out of Co-



Teaching Partnerships

In this *Edutopia* article, high-school administrator Sean Cassel lists the potential benefits and possible downsides of the six ways in which co-teaching can be orchestrated:

- **One teaching, one observing for evidence of learning – Potential benefits:** The observing teacher is freed up to watch for what’s working and what’s not (and for whom), and then huddling with the other teacher to decide on effective follow-up strategies. Possible downsides: The observing teacher doesn’t contribute to the lesson because of a lack of advance planning, content knowledge, or self-efficacy. “It takes time to develop a working relationship with another teacher,” says Cassel. “When the relationship isn’t working, this model appears more often, and often without purpose.”

- **One teaching, one helping individual students – Potential benefits:** More eyes are on students, adding valuable insights on what’s causing difficulty during a lesson. When teachers alternate

between frontal and one-on-one instruction, they gain and share insights from both perspectives and are seen as co-equal by students. Possible downsides: The assisting teacher is relegated to the role of assistant and/or has little impact on learning. If teachers don't plan together, there's no systematic focus on particular students or sharing of insights on lesson execution and follow-up.

- **Parallel teaching of the same information to two groups – Potential benefits**: Students are instructed in much smaller groups, it's easier for teachers to manage behavior, differentiate, and check for understanding, and students get more support and attention to their questions. Possible downsides: If both teachers don't have good content knowledge and/or don't have time to plan, this model can be weak and shortchange students.

- **Stations with students rotating between teachers – Potential benefits**: Each teacher can own a specific piece of the content, craft an engaging way to teach it, play to his or her strengths, and work sequentially with small, manageable groups of students. If there are stations in addition to those taught by the teachers, students get practice at working independently. Possible downsides: Teachers need to work closely together on timing and curriculum coverage, which means co-planning time is essential.

- **Alternative teaching, with one teaching a small needs-based group – Potential benefits**: One teacher accelerates the learning of students who are behind, were absent for prior instruction, have gaps in knowledge, or need special support. Possible downsides: This requires effective and timely data collection and monitoring of achievement as well as close coordination between the teachers.

- **Tag-team teaching to the whole class – Potential benefits**: "A true team-teaching lesson is a thing of beauty," says Cassel. "Two teachers whose

personalities complement each other offer benefits for all students in the classroom." This model also allows both teachers to share the spotlight. Possible downsides: Teachers winging it and not presenting coherent, effective instruction. Doing co-teaching well "requires years of experience, collaborative planning, and a positive, professional relationship that is always being refined and improved," says Cassel. That means administrators need to make thoughtful decisions matching teachers, provide adequate planning time for a high level of coordination, and observe classrooms to watch for situations where any of these models are not working as well as they should.

"How to Choose a Co-Teaching Model" by Sean Cassel in *Edutopia*, October 8, 2019, <https://www.edutopia.org/article/how-choose-co-teaching-model>



Online Supplemental Materials: Caveat Emptor

In this Thomas B. Fordham Institute white paper, Morgan Polikoff (University of Southern California) and consultant Jennifer Dean report on their study (with a team of four other reviewers) of the "bazaar" of supplemental curriculum materials available to teachers on the Internet. Here are their conclusions, based on an analysis of high-school ELA materials on three widely used platforms: **ReadWriteThink**, **Share My Lesson**, and **Teachers Pay Teachers**:

- The quality of the main texts was good to excellent, and students were often asked to provide textual evidence. Texts on ReadWriteThink and Share My Lesson got somewhat better ratings than Teachers Pay Teachers.



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- The materials were generally free from errors and well designed. Across the sites, materials on Share My Lesson were rated the least attractive and least organized, while those at ReadWriteThink were rated most positively on those criteria.
- However, most of the materials that accompany the texts were rated “mediocre” or “probably not worth using.” Fewer than 10 percent of the materials on each site were rated “exceptional.” The main concerns were lack of clarity and inadequate instructional guidance.



- Materials were weakly aligned with the standards to which they claimed to be aligned. “These low alignment ratings occur primarily because most materials claim alignment to a very large number of standards,” say Polikoff and Dean.
- The overall quality of writing, speaking, and listening tasks was weak. Although students were asked to write a paragraph or more in 82 percent of the materials, the tasks were not rigorous or high-quality.
- Assessments included in the materials ranked poorly because they sometimes failed to cover key content and rarely provided teachers with the supports needed to score student work.
- Lesson units did a poor job of building students’ content knowledge, and they were generally not cognitively demanding (reviewers used Webb’s Depth of Knowledge scale).
- The materials did a very poor job helping

teachers differentiate instruction for low-performing students, those with disabilities, and English language learners.

- Materials scored fairly low on how interesting they were likely to be to students, and did not reflect the cultural diversity of classrooms.

Polikoff and Dean have the following takeaways for high-school ELA teachers and school leaders:

- The supplemental materials market is “bewildering and begs curation.”
- Supplemental materials on these three sites have a long way to go before they can fill gaps in classrooms.
- There are significant gaps in assessments, supports for diverse learners, and diversity of authors and cultural content.
- Supervisors and coaches at the building and district level need to monitor the materials teachers are using in classrooms and help teachers find and develop high-quality materials.

“The Supplemental Curriculum Bazaar: Is What’s Online Any Good?” by Morgan Polikoff with Jennifer Dean, Thomas B. Fordham Institute, December 2019, <https://fordhaminstitute.org/national/research/supplemental-curriculum-bazaar>

