

CALMING, COMMUNITY, AND COMMUNICATION FOR TEACHERS

In the same way church leaders can facilitate healthy trauma response, schoolteachers have an important role to fill as a first responder to adversity and trauma children experience. While it is not in a teacher's job description to counsel each student nor is it feasible to do alongside the countless tasks and standards they must meet, it is in a teacher's best interest to tend to their student's emotional needs for a healthier classroom environment.

Childhood trauma necessitates a compassionate response. **The following is a list of practical rhythms and practices teachers can adopt to create a trauma informed classroom culture:**

CALMING

- ▶ Schedule a 5-minute period of quiet time for meditation, breathing, silence, prayer during transition periods or after recess.
- ▶ Take brief periodical stretch breaks throughout the day.
- ▶ When students "act out," require a full minute of slow breathing before inviting conversation about what happened.
- ▶ Encourage good nutrition, sleep, and exercise habits. Have students create a food, exercise, and sleep log to input their personal data. Motivate students with rewards when their sleep increases or they maintain healthy sleep rates. In cases when sleep does not improve, help connect students to behavioral health professionals who can assist them in identifying inhibitors.

Trauma is best treated when the person's situation or circumstance is heard and affirmed. When students walk through the door and receive eye contact and a smile from their superior, they feel their presence has been acknowledged. This brings ease to their emotional state. Other ways of acknowledging and creating safe spaces include establishing rhythms throughout the day that emphasize care and community, like a morning circle or daily journal prompt. The more children practice calming, the more they become resilient to adversity in the future.

COMMUNITY

- ▶ Maintain an up-to-date referral list of administrators, behavioral health professionals, mentors, and coaches to partner with as needed.



- ▶ Create a questionnaire to assess student's resiliency. Use this to identify unmet physical, emotional, or psychological needs in your classroom, primarily needs unmet at home.
- ▶ Partner with administrators and local behavioral health professionals to help meet needs.
- ▶ Create a customized personal care network for your students to complete.
- ▶ Identify the key people your students depend upon when they are not at school.
- ▶ Identify if there are needs in your student's' lives that could be served by a trusted mentor or coach.

It is important to assess a student's resiliency in order to identify unmet needs they are not getting at home that would hinder them from success in the classroom. The questionnaires do not need to be extensive, but should help identify people who take part in your students' lives outside of school. The questionnaire will help you to make decisions about what resources, if any, could be provided by the school.

COMMUNICATION

- ▶ Greet each student at the door in the morning with eye contact and an optional handshake, high five, or fist bump.
- ▶ Start the school week with a remark of gratitude. Allow each student the opportunity to share what their grateful for with the class or a partner.
- ▶ Showcase a daily/weekly joke or riddle for opportunities to laugh.
- ▶ Organize theater exercises that help students practice problem solving.
- ▶ Do mirror exercises.
- ▶ Help students recognize various feelings.
- ▶ Help students identify what anger, sadness, and anxiety feels like.
- ▶ Organize activities that necessitate group participation.
- ▶ Hold weekly class games (i.e. Steal the Bacon, Capture the Flag, Musical Chairs, Heads Up Seven Up, Around the World Pictionary)
- ▶ Gather students in a circle each morning for a brief 'check-in', 'morning circle', story, game, or question of the day.
- ▶ Practice and rehearse a group song or short skit as a class.



While it may be impossible to develop an entire drama curriculum in the context of an elementary school classroom, research shows that theater is helpful in healing from traumatic experiences. In *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel Van Der Kolk, Kolk references a drama program in Boston for youth in juvenile hall. He states, "Theater is about embodying emotions, giving voice to them, becoming rhythmically engaged, taking on and embodying different roles" (337). Youth experiencing trauma typically fear feeling. Theater provides the opportunity to adopt an emotion or feeling in a safe environment by helping the actor to acknowledge the presence of an emotion without shame. Theater promotes empathy when actors embody emotions that may have been previously unfamiliar to them. Theater allows one's soul to catch up with their mind so that their whole body is in tune.

Various improvisational games are also helpful in modeling problem solving. Traumatized youth have typically experienced someone doing them wrong. Theater exercises can help students to safely address areas of conflict. **Strengthening communication between the mind and body is key to building resiliency.**

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* For more information on caring for children and youth after trauma visit www.ictg.org.

