A trauma-informed approach to teaching through coronavirus — for students everywhere, online or not

# By [Valerie Strauss](https://www.washingtonpost.com/people/valerie-strauss/) March 26, 2020

 

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“Anxiety” is one of the words you hear frequently about our individual and collective reactions to the [coronavirus](https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/02/28/what-you-need-know-about-coronavirus/) pandemic — which has stopped public life in its tracks in much of the world. Kids are anxious. So are their parents and teachers and principals and superintendents and friends and elected officials. For those people who were anxious before covid-19, the sense of apprehension has only deepened.

Given that, this post offers expert advice on how to use trauma-informed curriculum while teaching students — whoever is doing it. This comes from [Teaching Tolerance](https://www.tolerance.org/), a project of the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Schools across the nation are closed and many are moving or have moved to online education. In some districts, schools are offering virtual classrooms where students can log on and attend a “live” class. Other students are getting only messages from teachers who have assignments for them to do at home and turn in. Teachers are using a host of platforms and programs from school to school, even in the same district.

Teaching Tolerance said it reached out to its community to learn what support families need now, and found that [among the most common responses](https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/teaching-through-coronavirus-what-educators-need-right-now) was a call for trauma-informed practices to support students. Then it turned to the [National Child Traumatic Stress Network](https://www.nctsn.org/) with questions and got answers from researchers, psychologists and educators. Teaching Tolerance credits Laura Danna, Jane Halladay Goldman, Jen Maze, George Ake and Isaiah Pickens for their answers.

Here is the advice, which Teaching Tolerance gave me permission to publish (and you can [find more here](https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/a-trauma-informed-approach-to-teaching-through-coronavirus)):

**We know that in some districts, schools have just closed, while in others, there’s an expectation that classes will shift to distance learning. This change can be a challenge for educators as well as students. From a trauma-informed standpoint, what do educators need to be conscious of as they navigate this transition?**

## Establishing a routine and maintaining clear communication are crucial.

Maintaining and communicating predictable routines is very important. Doing so helps students to maintain a sense of psychological safety — a sense that they can manage stress or connect with someone who can help them manage stress.

It is important not to assume that students understand your routine is changing due to current events. Even if routines shift as you determine the best ways of connecting, taking the time to explain the changes and provide a predictable agenda is helpful. It will reduce student stress and increase their confidence that important adults in their lives are capable of taking care of them.

It’s also important that educators ensure that the information they provide to students is digestible. Moving to remote learning and having fewer direct interactions can make assignments feel more overwhelming and daunting — particularly when several directions are given at once. Break directions down into smaller bites when necessary and encourage students to ask clarifying questions even if it appears they understand.

Finally, we can’t assume students’ experiences with remote learning or their understanding of a global pandemic is universal. Encourage students to lead the way in sharing what they understand and do not understand about their current situation. You can do this by asking open-ended questions, such as, “How are you feeling about not being in school?” which can provide insight without letting assumptions guide the conversation. Approach students’ experiences with curiosity. Aim to clarify misinformation and connect students with other important adults (such as family) who help them feel safe.

## Relationships and well-being can take priority over assignment and behavioral compliance.

In shifts to distance learning, educators will need to actively focus on maintaining attitudes of inclusivity. Now more than ever, students should feel valued and welcome regardless of their background or identity.

Remember that students may be dealing with many different home life situations while trying to maintain their academics, and there are myriad reasons they may be embarrassed to share about why they can’t complete assignments. Educators should communicate that, regardless of challenges, students’ efforts are appreciated.

In work with students right now, educators should let relationships be the focus. It is important to ensure students have structure and to hold high expectations. But students will fare best if they know their teachers care about their well-being just as much as their behavior and assignment compliance.

Educators can display their investment by creating relational rituals before checking on distance learning assignments with students. For example, students and educators can share one tough moment and one hopeful moment of the day, or educators and students can share one new lesson they learned about themselves during the day. Participating in these shares can help educators build and maintain connection despite the distance.

**What are a few key points educators need to understand about stress, trauma and their effects? Are there specific approaches to student support they should be prioritizing during this crisis?**

When people are facing stress and difficult life circumstances, it can particularly affect three areas: a sense of safety, feelings of connectedness and feelings of hope. In each of these areas, educators can make an impact.

## A sense of safety

A sense of safety is the belief that your needs — and the needs of those you care about — will be met. It is a belief that you will be protected from harm and that those around you will be safe. Educators can expect that many students’ sense of safety will be compromised right now. None of us have ever seen a time like this, when institutions that provide safety and structure are closed, and the news talks about death rates and hospital bed shortages. For the many families that are experiencing or will experience significant income loss, this crisis may also mean food insecurity or an inability to pay rent and bills — all of which can severely damage a child’s sense of safety.

But there are steps educators can take to support a sense of safety in children. They can:

* Reach out, provide space and encourage students to connect with them or another trusted adult or counselor to talk about their safety concerns. Offer students a way to connect if there is something that they need help with or are worried about.
* Encourage students to talk to friends or family members on the phone.
* Help students plan some virtual playdates to distract them from their worries.
* Recommend or include in lesson plans and packets some [fun, free activities that kids can do at home](https://www.nctsn.org/resources/simple-activities-children-and-adolescents).
* Encourage families and caregivers to avoid watching the news in front of their children (as that can be upsetting), keep as much of a regular family routine as possible, and plan activities such as going for walks or hikes or playing board or video games together.

## Connectedness

Connectedness refers to having relationships with others who can understand and support you. As we are practicing social distancing and have closed most public places, educators will need to get creative to help students feel connected.

To foster a sense of connectedness, educators can:

* Make time to ask students about something fun they are doing right now.
* Greet students by name and create a touch-free or virtual routine (similar to a handshake, a hug or a high five) to invite connection, either online or at meal pickup.
* Consider putting students together in small groups to work on projects or activities and encouraging students to work together online or by phone. These activities may include virtual puzzles or scavenger hunts. The key is to help the student feel connected to others in the class by sharing an important part of themselves that helps the class get to know them better. Foster a sense of community by highlighting each student’s contribution to the group activity.
* Plan activities through the use of web-conferencing sites that allow students to see, hear and interact with each other and their teacher.
* Talk directly about the importance of connecting with others.
* Incorporate space for play and fun activities into online lesson plans or take-home packets.

## Hope

Hope is the expectation that everything will work out and the feeling that things will be all right. Right now, many people may be feeling discouraged, hopeless or angry. Adults and students may be feeling a great sense of loss for activities that will not be taking place as usual. Students particularly may be disappointed in missing out on sports, competition, performances and other important rituals of the spring semester.

**To encourage a sense of hope, educators can:**

* Have students connect with someone in their family or community to ask a person they respect how they stayed hopeful in troubled times.
* Teach about other historical times of crisis, including how these ended and communities rebounded.
* Encourage students to get fresh air and to move when possible.
* Share some of the many stories of hope and helping that have come out of this current crisis.
* Share a positive affirmation or a strength of a student — it can go a long way right now.
* Let students know that people find help in different ways, including through spiritual beliefs and practices, and encourage students to discuss things that bring them hope.
* Facilitate and encourage students meeting virtually or by phone with a trusted adult who can show them a different perspective, help to identify their talents and strengths, list their options and resources, and encourage and support them.

## In addition to the suggestions above, are there any activities for students (either for online classes or that students can do independently) that you recommend educators try?

Now is a time to provide opportunities for students to complete activities that affirm their competence, sense of self-worth and feelings of safety. There are many social emotional learning practices and wellness activities that teachers can encourage students to complete independently or online.

These activities can promote self-regulation when students are feeling stressed and provide a healthy sense of control over controllable aspects of an overwhelming situation. Some possible social emotional and wellness practices can include the following:

* Promote self-awareness by having students review a feelings chart and share how they are feeling. To help them communicate their feelings, encourage the use of a scale, such as, “On a scale of 1-10, how bored are you feeling?” or “Are you feeling a little lonely, somewhat lonely, or very lonely?”
* Recommend quick mindfulness or self-soothing exercises such as smelling a flower or completing four-corner breathing before completing the lesson. Four-corner breathing simply involves inhaling deeply and exhaling deeply four times. Students can complete this breathing exercise by standing up and taking one inhale and exhale breath while facing each of the four corners in a room.
* Model and normalize a range of emotions by giving students opportunities to express themselves in nonverbal ways. This may include drawing a picture about how their lesson or day is going or showing the most important thing that happened to them that day. Teachers can complete this exercise first and share with students to model how to share with others in a way that feels safe and helps us feel connected.
* Have students complete a virtual or long-distance appreciation or gratitude circle. Encourage students to write one thing they appreciate about classmates. Add your own, and then give each student the appreciations written about them.
* Give students the chance to share what they’ve learned or a chance to teach their classmates. This can include having students find and teach brief self-soothing or mindfulness exercises that promote self-regulation.

## Are there students in particular situations that educators should be keeping closer contact with during this period? Do you have recommendations for ways educators can reach out?

While not all families have a history of exposure to trauma, children with identified histories of trauma may be especially vulnerable to the impact of significant changes in schedule, routine and expectations that come with social distancing, canceled classes, remote learning and reliance on caregivers for academics.

Other students may also be at additional risk during this time:

* students who have had anxiety;
* students who have depression or suicidal ideation;
* students who have learning and attention disorders;
* students whose families may have lost jobs or income;
* students who have loved ones particularly vulnerable to the covid-19 virus;
* students who have a caregiver who is a health-care worker or in another occupation where they are exposed to the virus or are being asked to respond in an intense way;
* students who may be less supervised because of caregivers’ work.

Even remotely, however, there are ways that educators can provide extra support to these students:

* Educators can reach out to caregivers to check in and offer or explain the supports that they typically use in the classroom with their children.
* Educators can set up individual conferences via computer or phone to check in with students and ask about their safety and worries.
* Educators can and should connect with school mental health professionals to know how they can connect students and families with them when necessary.

## What kinds of stressors or potential trauma will families and caregivers be facing during this time that educators should be aware of? How can educators help?

In general, it is important to consider that the stress adults might be facing during this time of uncertainty will probably be mirrored in children. Families could be dealing with high levels of stress, and they probably will be for an extensive amount of time. Educators can consider sharing messages about how families need to give themselves some space when emotions run high, and they can model how to regulate emotions to help children cope.

Educators should have an appreciation for how kids might respond to stress and consider [how stress might play out by age group](https://www.nctsn.org/resources/parent-caregiver-guide-to-helping-families-cope-with-the-coronavirus-disease-2019). Whenever possible, they should share this information with caregivers.

Educators can also play a role in promoting the message that caretakers should try their best to establish a routine, involve children in the development of their own schedules, and maintain reasonable expectations of children, knowing that some changes are just difficult to predict.

Finally, we understand that in other countries, rates of domestic violence and child abuse have increased during the covid-19 crisis. Stress and increased isolation are risk factors for abuse. Families experiencing difficult financial issues or job loss during this time might be especially at risk. But all families will be under increased stress and isolation with varying levels of support and resources.

For more information about child trauma and child traumatic stress, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network has many resources to help educators and caretakers better understand the impact, consequences and resilience of children and families exposed to trauma. [This page](https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/about-child-trauma) is a good place to start.

## What steps do you recommend for educators who want to be there for their students but who might also be dealing with their own stress right now?

* Practice self-kindness, and remember that it is best to [take care of yourself](https://www.nctsn.org/resources/taking-care-of-yourself) before you try to take care of anyone else.
* Take time to check in with yourself to gain insight into where you may be struggling. Once you identify the issues, work to create a plan to address the issues you can control and to work on letting go of the ones you cannot.
* Utilize social supports as needed. Consider planning a virtual coffee break or lunch hour with colleagues or other educators via Zoom, where you might share strategies that are or are not working, talk about what you’re cooking or watching on Netflix, and experience a much-needed sense of community
* Create a routine that includes getting up at a regular time, getting ready and dressed for the day, a work schedule, some way to move your body and some breaks to connect to others.
* Remember that, as adults, we are the best predictors of how our students and children are doing; they are watching and listening to us. When we take care of ourselves, we’re showing them how they can take care of themselves, too.

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