

Stephanie Filio, M.Ed.

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RESPONDING TO STUDENT TRAUMA

A TOOLKIT FOR SCHOOLS
IN TIMES OF CRISIS

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

This book has been filed with the Library of Congress.

LCCN: 2020943090

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Edited by Meg Bratsch

Cover and interior design by Emily Dyer

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An imprint of Teacher Created Materials

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to all the students who sleep, eat, cry, write, laugh, type, read, fold paper cranes, and dare to dream in the stillness of the school counselor's office when the rest of the world is chaotic.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have been lucky enough to work with some of the most amazing educators in my city, state, and country. At each school I have worked in, with each administrator and every teacher relationship, I have gained more tools for my toolbox. This includes the larger educational community at Free Spirit Publishing who seek to reach students through their publishing, editing, writing, and wrangling of “free spirits” like me!

Amazing peers in our school counseling family (ayyyeeee my beautiful LKMS school counseling team!), school social workers, and the many specialists all bring another level of enrichment to our schools. They have taught me grace and teamwork and great compassion, always reminding me to remain a lifelong learner at heart. Of course, my amazing, devoted, and vocal middle school kids continue to be my central guides to better myself and my practice. They tell me what they need, and they are patient with me as I learn. They are truly our “next steps” as we navigate our developing world.

Eddie, Maddie, and Mason: thank you for always sharing me with my “school babies.” Thank you also to the rest of my family (including those stalwart friends) who still encourage me to dream big, step outside of the box, and take chances in life and with my heart. Be good.

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INTRODUCTION

AN ODE TO 2020 AND THE PANDORA'S BOX IT OPENED

The COVID-19 pandemic hit the world hard. Sometimes it feels like it was the opening show to one of the most challenging years we have ever experienced. In the same way that I started looking around my house and noticing things that needed fixing, perhaps the quarantine-induced stillness revealed obstacles in our society that had always bubbled below the surface but remained covered by busy, moving schedules. Either way, recent months have been turbulent to say the least. We are still paddling our way out of deep waters, and the future remains very uncertain. If we have learned anything, however, it is that the connections we foster and the ways we support each other make all the difference, especially in the darkest of times.

In the days that followed the announcement of the school closures, many educators connected with colleagues, parked alone in front of our empty schools and cried, had comforting staff meetings on Zoom, and began to imagine our identities as teachers, counselors, administrators, coaches, and specialists outside of the school building. Then, we got down to business.

Like other industries during the pandemic wave, we had to figure out how to adapt to many new challenges, and fast. Along with healthcare, education stood out among the most resilient professions. Within days, many of us had schedules, online spaces, meetings, spreadsheets, and a plan. These early days and the weeks that followed were not without flaws, but not for lack of effort. I was in such awe with my own administrative team and the teachers I am so lucky to work with, it almost felt like an out-of-body experience. As if to not allow the adults to outdo them, many of our young students responded in spades as well. Some joined us digitally, some completed work on their own, some contacted their teachers through TikTok! Even for those students and school districts that faced additional obstacles to digital learning, the heart and intense dedication were there.

Behind the scenes of high-intensity situations like this, our brains work in overdrive to process our thoughts and emotions. Strength and grit will only take us so far as we try to develop understanding. In time, our students often sat silently in virtual lunch bunches begging us not to end the video calls because they just wanted to be together in some capacity. They started to message us about their sadness, and we began to get reports of children and families struggling to endure.

I've heard stories about people getting hit by cars and standing up immediately afterward, only to collapse when the body's adrenaline slows down—allowing their minds to register the pain from broken bones. Similarly, the excitement of adapting to the pandemic situation began to wear off and we started to feel the full effects of what was actually happening. Institutions our lives had always been based on simply stopped, social interactions that got us from one day to another were no more, and safety felt far out of reach. We were suffering and so were our students.

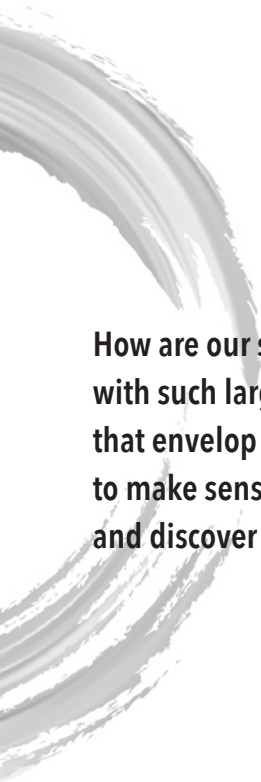
And then, as we were reeling from the pandemic, we took another huge fall. This time, the problem was not a virus, it was us. While we watched the police murder of George Floyd in horror, and witnessed and/or participated in mass protests, historic patterns of inequality and racism were laid bare. Our country as a whole began to fully register the reality that years of implicit, and often explicit, systemic racism has been allowed to control the masses and destroy the lives of our Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) citizens. It is tragic to think of the progress our society could have made over the decades by more strongly supporting BIPOC students—and future leaders—and guiding White students to understand racism and become anti-racist.

How are our students coping with such large-scale traumas that envelop them as they try to make sense of their world and discover their identities? These

large-scale crises are eclipsing all of the usual crises young people already endure and must make approaching adulthood seem daunting, if not impossible.

I know I am not alone in believing that educators are here to help change the course of history. When we give our students a voice and a platform, they are able to grow into adults who will lead our country and world in meaningful and impassioned

ways. With our guidance and belief, they will renew *our* hope in the ability of humans to create an equitable and just world. Our students deserve our care and understanding of what they have already been through and of the traumas they are currently experiencing. After all, one might say that we adults are the root of the problem for allowing such health threats and societal tensions to rise to this point in the first place.



How are our students coping with such large-scale traumas that envelop them as they try to make sense of their world and discover their identities?

What have I learned personally from the trauma I have experienced in recent months? Sometimes, big things happen—and not just one at a time. Sometimes, we can work really hard to plan and prepare, and things can still fall apart. When these crises arise, we cannot go back to the way things were before, and that can feel sad and scary. What we *can* do is adapt (even if slowly), and once we allow the fog to clear, we can find solace inside the spaces we have created in our own minds and hearts. And perhaps most importantly, *nobody* is in this alone.



Everything can be taken from a [person] but one thing:
the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in
any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

—VIKTOR E. FRANKL



Using This Book to Respond to Students in Crisis

As I write this, the upcoming 2020–2021 school year will present unique challenges in terms of traumatization for our students. They have been on a rough road together, experiencing a global pandemic, terrifying medical warnings, international community upheaval, and explicit messages confirming that racism is not only a powerful and destructive force in our society, but a real, physical threat for countless children and teens. Do we know of a time when the sneeze of a classmate could elicit anxious feelings? How will our Black students feel, in the wake of Floyd's murder and ongoing protests, walking into schools and classrooms surrounded by the authority of mostly White teachers and principals? What feelings or interactions will arise within conversations between students at a time when emotions and fears are so raw and exposed?

One of the major distinctions between school counselors and other counseling and educational professions is our understanding of mental health within the learning environment. This expertise allows us to aid students in the development of their emotional health, which is necessary for knowledge acquisition and overall growth. We believe that students achieve the greatest success when the whole person is strong and fit. The biggest obstacle to this work by far is student trauma.

I often tell people that I believe school counseling is more of an education philosophy than a profession. Though school counselors are trained specifically for their role in mental health, their aim is for students to be socially and

emotionally healthy so they can be the best learners they can be. Unfortunately, not all schools have the funding for supportive roles such as school counselors and social workers. Although I believe we provide a clear and measurable value to the educational environment, many teachers and administrators bear the burden of both the academic instruction and the emotional development of the children they serve. Hence, this book is designed to be used by all educators, providing tools for planning trauma responses that can be used by a wide variety of staff members, whomever they may be.

I like to picture student development as a complex, living system. A growing child exercises various parts within this system, such as mental health, physical health, motivation, learning, and recall. The overall developmental goal is to attain alignment and balance for adult life through experiential learning and social and emotional support. When one of the system's parts is stressed because of traumatic experiences, it will pull energy from the other parts to fill the void. A student in crisis, for example, will likely feel helpless and confused. As their head works on their heart, a gap forms in their education because the trauma sucks energy away from the motivation and attention they need to learn. The purpose of using trauma responses with students is to help young people process their experiences, repair the damage to their mental health, and bring their system back into balance.

The purpose of using trauma responses with students is to help young people process their experiences, repair the damage to their mental health, and bring their system back into balance.

Four Sources of Student Trauma

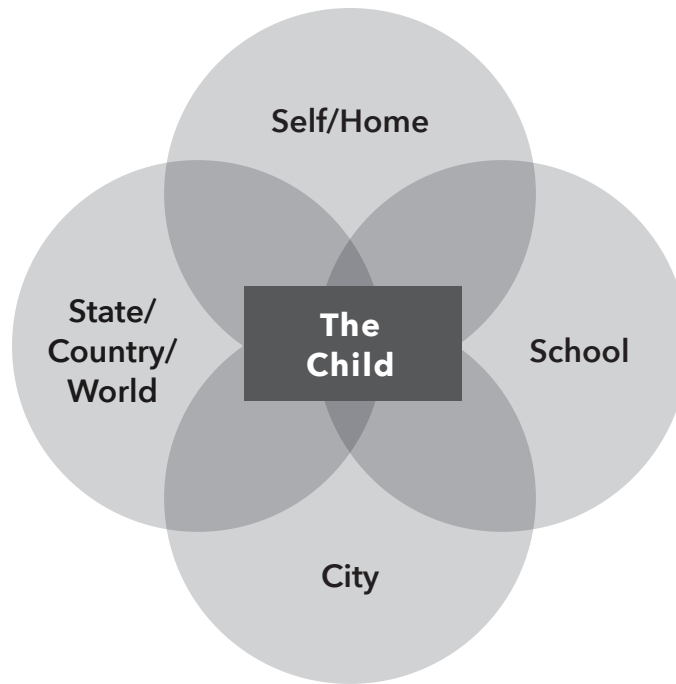
The four primary sources of student trauma discussed in this book are the child's *self/home, school, city, and state/country/world*. Events and struggles in each of these environments have the potential to harm a student's well-being and mental processes in different ways. This book explores each source of trauma and presents focused techniques that can be used specifically within that area. The techniques can also be used together to create more customized options.

The goal is to achieve fluidity in our trauma response practices so we can individualize strategies when responding to specific traumatic events and to students' specific needs. Each chapter has specified action items that you can implement immediately and use as a step-by-step guide to revamp your trauma response procedures across the four sources of trauma. The action items build on each other so that by the end of the book, you will have a comprehensive, collaborative, and updated trauma response program.

As you read, keep students' ages in mind when using the examples provided as models for training and practice. Though the basic actions suggested for

revamping your trauma protocols would work for a range of elementary and secondary levels, it's crucial to consider age and population when making decisions about communication and lesson planning.

Figure 1.0 The Sources of Student Trauma



There is no quick fix when working with students who are experiencing the emotional domino effects of traumatic events, but there is the possibility of a well-orchestrated long game. Some key questions we need to ask to understand and respond to trauma include:

- What are the sources of trauma?
- What information is helpful for our mental health practitioners to have?
- What plans need to be in place to address traumatic events?
- What resources need to be provided in a crisis response kit?
- How can various staff members help address student trauma together?
- How do we plan for unknown crises that might arise in the future?

As you read, reflect on the students you work with so you can begin the conversation on how best to support them in your school (or even other workplaces).

By focusing on mental health in any environment, we can support everyone and live healthier lives. As you construct your response plan, provide training, and solidify schedules, think about ways that you can weave social and emotional learning and trauma-informed care into the framework of how you already operate. Be ready to respond to different types of trauma in different spheres, make concrete protocols to support your colleagues, and, ultimately, help provide harmony in your building even if the backyard is in chaos.

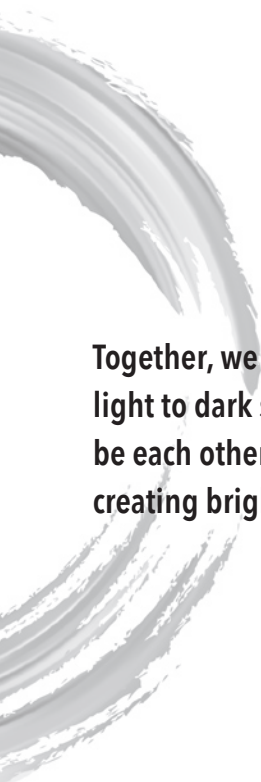
A Call to Action

The purpose of this book is to provide a linear and organized way to view trauma exposure in our schools and to help you create clear and concise protocols for responding to the needs of students during crisis. The heartbeat of each school is driven by countless relationships and interactions among students, staff, families, and community partners. With so many opportunities for student support within this complex structure, sometimes breaking our protocols down to the smallest parts reminds us of the details we may have forgotten over time.

The year 2020 brought the world some of the most tumultuous times we have ever seen. Luckily, educators are solution-focused. We know that the road ahead of us is going to be tough, and our students and families need us to help them heal from the traumas they have experienced. We also know that we will be ready to the very best of our ability. Teachers, administrators, specialists, school counselors, office associates, cafeteria servers, security teams, and custodial staff all devote their careers to children and will put in the hard work to make a plan that will allow us to support our students. We are not the only resource for our families, but we are an integral part of community-based services that can work collaboratively for children.

Just as we remain pillars for our students, a sturdy trauma protocol can support school staff in times of crisis. Adults are not safe from the harmful effects of witnessing and experiencing trauma. Hopefully, the framework provided in the following sections will also help school staff feel secure at work.

The action items in this book can be accomplished by any school staff member who is knowledgeable about trauma response. This might include someone on the school leadership team, school counselors, or teachers. As with any effort, however, there is strength in numbers. Everyone can play a part and evaluate these procedures to offer each school the most comprehensive perspective on the trauma affecting its students and the task of identifying student needs. Together, we can work to bring light to dark situations, and be each other's inspiration for creating brighter times ahead.



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CHAPTER 1

THE SELF/HOME: LATENT TRAUMA

Examples of trauma within the self/home: mental illness; crisis in the home; experiences with prejudice; violence or abuse in the family; loss of housing/resources; substance abuse; serious illness, injury, or death of a family member; struggles with identity; lack of medical attention.

When we think of trauma, we often point to external, exposed moments of crisis like a death in the family, abrupt divorce, or a singular violent event. We have a tangible idea of what emotions the student might be grappling with, such as loss or hurt, and we can make clear plans to help support the student. Sometimes, though, trauma is more latent and beneath the surface. We might not immediately recognize the emergence of a mental health disorder or experiences with racism. In these more systemic traumatic situations, trauma creeps quietly and is normalized over time, making the source less identifiable. Educators are tasked with keeping a keen eye on student behavior to be able to respond swiftly and ensure the safety of the student by finding them support.

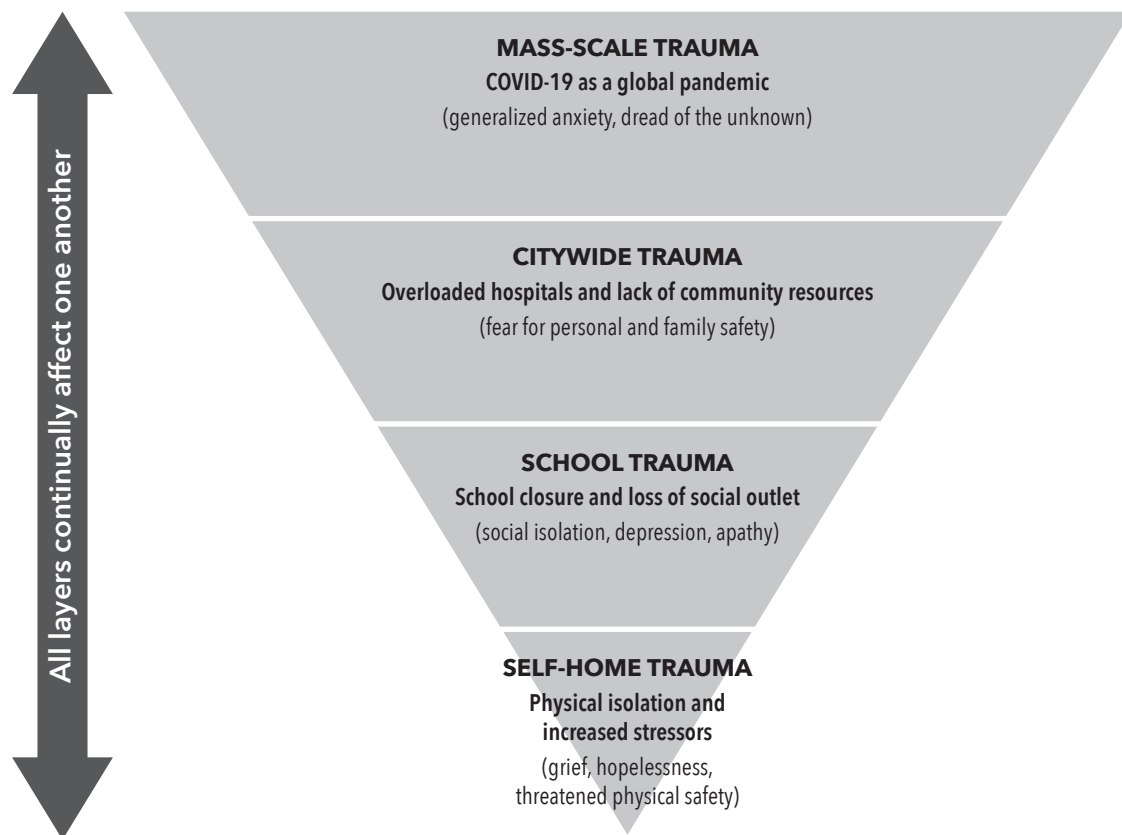
Layers of Trauma in Students' Lives

Larger traumatic events trickle down through the spheres of a student's world to create layers of trauma. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we know that students may be experiencing anxiety and dread over the distressing images they are seeing in the media as they watch overloaded hospitals and widespread illness. They know they are living in a world in peril. As the fallout reaches local communities, students may see more particular crises through medical care shortages and unavailability of community resources that they have come to depend on (like school, sports, social clubs, worship services, and food banks), creating feelings of fear for their family and their own safety and wellness.

With the unprecedented school closures, we have seen students lose hope and feel isolated and depressed when this community pillar is no longer accessible. For some students, being at home all the time may also mean increased exposure to violence and physical or mental abuse, the effects of strained economic

resources, or physical or mental illness within their own home, causing extreme stress and hopelessness. This stress, in turn, magnifies the individual trauma a student may already be experiencing, such as anxiety, depression, special needs diagnoses, self-esteem issues, peer cruelty, or changes relating to puberty. These layers of trauma echo the four sources of trauma discussed earlier: the self/home, school, city, and state/country/world. It is important to note that during these times of global crisis, it's impossible to treat each layer separately; we must be responding to student trauma of all types from all sources, and our responses should build on one another. For example, if there is trauma in a school, we must address the group trauma as well as the trauma of individuals directly involved. In doing so, the student is enveloped in support by the layered efforts of trauma response occurring within the school.

Figure 1.1 Example of the Layers of Student Trauma



When a large group of people are struggling with trauma, you can feel the palpable weight of their struggle. With the disparities that our nation and world

have experienced while enduring the COVID-19 pandemic, financial hardship, and widespread unrest in response to systemic racism, it is safe to say that the next several years will find students entering our hallways in a heavy fog of concern. They will have grown, they will have endured hardship, and they will likely still be struggling. The relative security that some felt before these impactful events will be forever altered. We will need to diligently observe student behavior and be careful not to minimize their actions or shut them down with comments alleging “attention-seeking drama” in order to help them before their emotions manifest into destructive outlets.

Recognizing Student Trauma

Oftentimes, when a student experiences trauma in their personal life, they show tell-tale signs of struggling. Abrupt changes in behavior and chronic fatigue are natural body responses that students often do not even realize are happening. Sometimes, however, student behavior changes are less noticeable (like obsessive questioning) or done with a smile (like overly playful behavior in the classroom). Whether students exhibit obvious or less obvious responses to trauma, it is important to address these changes.

Figure 1.2 Signs of Trauma and Stress

Obvious Signs of Trauma and Stress	Less Obvious Signs of Trauma and Stress
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Swift drop in grades • Despondency • Detachment from peers • Sleepiness or lethargy • Abrupt attendance change • Skipping meals and loss of appetite • Mood changes/emotional outbursts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lingered around the counselor’s office • Less interest in hobbies • Bouts of daydreaming • Increased requests to call home • Loitering in the bathrooms • Increased obsession with order • Constant questioning/double-checking

Sometimes, a school is unaware of a student’s traumatic experience. In these cases, student behavior often feels like it comes out of nowhere. For example, the quiet student who has always been able to avoid the spotlight by sitting politely in the back of the room gets into a fight in the locker room, or the boisterous student who disrupts their way through class comes to school one day with scabbed lines on their arms. These students may not have strong connections

with adults in their school—some children avoid relationships with staff as learned self-defense or as a safeguard of family secrets. Though no one may have seen their behavior as it changed, swift trauma protocol can be used to establish trusting connection and find interventions to help these students.


I always appreciate when a teacher sends me a message to check on a student who “seems off.” Many times, I find that there is indeed something below the surface that I would not otherwise have seen. A student who has stopped socializing and appears lethargic during class, for example, might come to my office and disclose that their grandparent who has always lived in the home is now in hospice. With a busy caretaking parent and a student unable to verbalize their sadness, the school would likely have had no idea that anything was going on at home. Without that “heads up” from the observant teacher, I would not have had the opportunity to create support through something so heavy and life-changing.

The very reason social and emotional learning (SEL) is essential in the educational environment is that it is often in school that emotions are unearthed. It is difficult to process traumatic events in the introspective and orderly school

environment as students try to move through the day struggling with focus, feeling isolated from their peers, and carrying the weight of their secrets.

When a student starts to process the magnitude of whatever anguish they are experiencing, the school community reaches a pivotal moment together. All of

the hard work that the teachers, school counselors, administrators, specialists, teacher assistants, and office workers have put into making connections comes together. The collective positive rapport and established trust with students becomes our window to assisting a student in crisis. This is a critical first step in responding to any student experiencing trauma, making it easier to assess the situation and begin to gather data for responding.



The collective positive rapport and established trust with students becomes our window to assisting a student in crisis.

Action Items for Updating Response Procedures for Self/Home-Based Trauma

The action items in figure 1.3 can assist any school in developing or updating a fundamental trauma response protocol. These are largely tasks that the school as a whole can utilize and benefit from while navigating times of crises with students. It is best if a central group of staff (usually administration, school counselors, and/or teacher leaders) establishes norms and practices for the school,

and then creates dynamic training opportunities for the collective staff. However, you can identify your “power players” based on what resources are available to you within your district or school. If necessary, an individual teacher can create their own trauma response protocol for their classroom and teaching practice.

Figure 1.3 Action Items for Self/Home-Based Trauma

Protocol	Goal	Trauma Response Update Ideas
Calling Home	<i>Ensure there is a protocol for calling home for trauma inquiries.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide professional development (PD) on family communication. • Use specific activities to teach the protocol in PD groups.
Relationship Building	<i>Allow time for building relationships with students throughout the day.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate staff schedules to allow time for relationship building. • Create mentorships, check-ins/outs, and/or advisory programs.
Emergency Numbers	<i>Emphasize mandated reporting requirements and ensure all staff have community emergency numbers.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide handouts to post in each classroom. • Include the information in PD.
School Trauma Response	<i>Establish a schoolwide trauma response protocol and make sure staff are up-to-date.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a copy to each teacher for the classroom and include it in all substitute teacher folders. • Construct PD workshops using sample scenarios.
Needs Assessments	<i>Create assessments and collect data to find out what your students need.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine the assessment’s purpose and create assessments within PD groups. • Use assessment data in PD workshops to address student needs.

The very least of trauma response in schools is a thoughtful protocol for responding to students in crisis. Rules and actions should be clearly stated and transparent for staff. Most schools already have this protocol on some level, but due to the rapid changes our students have experienced in recent months, revamping these policies and procedures may be in order. Some of it will remain the same, and some of our protocols will look much different. For example, with the absence of hugs and whispered confidentiality—and even smiles while staff and students wear masks—we will need to rethink expressions of care.



Building Strong Connections with Students and Families

Rapport building is much like saving money. Each tiny interaction we have with a student provides an opportunity for them to feel heard and cared for.

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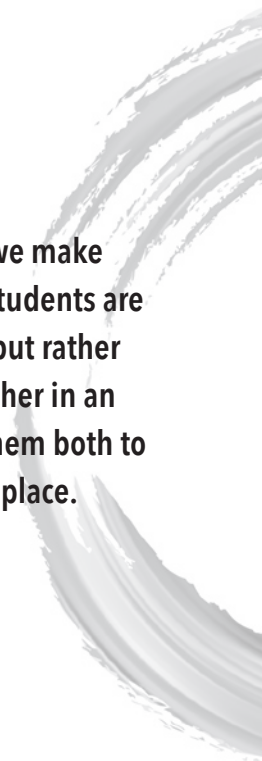
Remembering something personal about them, offering a snack, sharing an inside joke, and smiling or waving are all tiny deposits that go into that individual account. Alone, these simple actions might seem trivial, but together they are an investment that you make in the work you and the student do together over time or in a time of crisis. The key to building relationships is staying the course. This means continuing to put in this effort even when students do not respond warmly, or when you cannot see the investment growing.

Calling home is one of the easiest actions an educator can take to build stronger relationships with students. In my own practice, I love calling home because I get to learn more about family dynamics, and if the parent is willing to work with me on school-based initiatives for their child, I also get to show the student that we are a united front. In most cases, the more a family approves of me, the more a student sees me as an integrated part of their life. Sometimes, this requires delicate individual conversations with students, parents, and other staff members to try to bring everyone to a better understanding of each other. For example, if a student is struggling after revealing a sexual orientation that their parents do not accept, I can work on identity development and self-advocacy with the student, while providing resources and perspective to the parent. The relationships we make with parents and students are not independent, but rather tethered to each other in an attempt to bring them both to a healthy meeting place.

Stakeholders coming together in support is important for all students, and especially important for students in homes that are struggling with unstable housing, food insecurity, contentious divorce, or domestic violence. In the aftermath of the many recent events in the United States and abroad, hardships such as these have multiplied. Creating a collaborative environment that the student might be craving can be done by reaching out. When calling home to explore possible sources of trauma, try to do the following:

- 1. Begin with a general check-in.** Ask the parent or guardian how everything is going and open up a lighter dynamic in the conversation so the parent doesn't build quick defense mechanisms. Most parents are trying their best, and constantly receiving negative phone calls can be defeating. We want to earn their trust.

2. **Discuss something you love about their child.** Leading with positive qualities and showing how well you know their child will mean a lot to a parent who feels exhausted from having to constantly advocate for their child's needs. We have to distinguish ourselves from other hardships or prejudices parents have experienced and dealt with in their lives.
3. **Consistently check in with your own feelings, even as you discuss the behavior in question.** Are you reporting the behavior because it is attention-seeking and you hope there are consequences at home, or are you reporting the behavior because you know there is something deeper going on? If you feel that you are calling in anger, you are not alone! However, though we are in one of the most taxing professions, we are responsible for processing our personal frustrations and returning to a place of concern before addressing an issue with a parent.
4. **Let the parents know you are concerned and why.** Align your intentions to be centered on healing. Make it clear that you are seeking advice to create a solution.
5. **Listen.** The source of trauma might be expressed, or you may need to read between the lines of what a struggling parent is saying. Just, *really* listen. If they react with anger, listen. If they cry, listen. If they are exasperated, listen. The seed of injury is in there somewhere, and the goal is to identify it and assist before it takes over.
6. **Ask the parent how they feel.** When a student experiences trauma, so too does their family. When we are holistically student-centered, we know part of that is a stable home life. This is not to say that a teacher or counselor can take on the weight of qualified social service agents or mental health counselors. But sometimes, just asking someone if they are okay can offer a friendly ray of hope during a difficult time.
7. **Make a plan that includes solicited advice from the parent.** Tell the parent you have some ideas for how you can support the student at school but be explicit in pointing out that as the parent, they know their child better than anyone else. Strategies like check-ins, teacher team meetings, journal time, and quiet lunches with the counselor might help a parent feel reassured and help the student feel like the school environment is more manageable while they are in distress.



The relationships we make with parents and students are not independent, but rather tethered to each other in an attempt to bring them both to a healthy meeting place.