

If interested, this topic can be learned in greater detail through a full day workshop called “Trauma Informed Classrooms.” Please contact Sara at sara@growingrootstherapy.ca or 204-333-9804 for more information or to book a workshop.

Being Trauma Sensitive

Trauma Triggers

What is a Trauma Trigger?

It is common for a child who has experienced traumatic events to feel emotional distress and/or physical reactions when they encounter something that symbolizes or resembles an aspect of the event(s)¹. These reminders are often called **trauma triggers**. The trigger activates the hyper aroused survival part of the brain which leads to a stress response before the thinking part of the brain can make sense of the trigger and determine that it is not a source of danger⁴.

Common Triggers in the classroom

A trigger can be a cue in the child’s environment, such as a certain expression on someone’s face, a sound, or a smell. It can also be something internal, such as a thought, feeling or sensation. For example, the increased heart rate of physical activity may remind a child of the pounding heart they experienced when they were terrified during a traumatic event⁶. In a school setting some common triggers can be: discipline procedures, tests, traditional curricula and assignment demands, public speaking, fire alarms, lock down drills, unpredictable events, teacher absences, crowded spaces, smells, sounds, tastes, specific people, places, things, sensations, situations, anniversaries, feelings, mistreatment by a fellow classmates, and field trips.

Responses to Triggers

Responses to triggers happen automatically and a child experiencing them will likely be unable to explain that they feel they are in danger⁴. A behavioral response to a trigger, such as outbursts, withdrawal, disassociation, or agitation are more common and may be the student’s way of communicating that they do not feel safe. It is important that a teacher be attentive to patterns of behavioral responses so that possible triggers of those behaviors can be identified and reduced to create a more supportive learning environment.

What the classroom teacher can do to help

Triggers cannot be entirely eliminated from the school environment and ultimately a child will need to learn strategies to cope⁴. However, teachers can create a classroom with reduced stressors and establish a supportive environment so that a child feels safe and learning is maximized. Below are some general suggestions to reduce triggers in the classroom compiled from the references below:

- Create predictable schedules and routines especially around transition times throughout the school day and school year such as holidays and provide visual cues for transitions such as clocks and calendars.
- Provide students with choice during work periods to allow them a sense of control.
- Provide options for ways of conducting assignments so students can choose a medium they feel comfortable with (ie. presentation, poster, essay, video, etc)
- Be selective regarding what sort of personal information and reflection is requested of students when it comes to family, identity, and the student's past.
- Involve students when changes are made to the classroom set up.
- Greet students individually at the start and end of day to check in with them.
- Notify students before an anticipated teacher absence, arrange for a familiar substitute and have the substitute follow the daily routine
- Notify students about upcoming fire drills/lockdowns and practice how to respond during safety drills.
- Provide quiet activities before and after events like school assemblies or recess.
- Provide ear plugs or the opportunity for breaks during an assembly such as a water break or errand to allow a child to step out of a crowded or loud situation.
- Create designated safe spaces for student to calm themselves and self-regulate when they are triggered.
- Attend to the behavioral patterns of students as triggers are unique to each child.

Resources

1. American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders (5th ed.). Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Publishing.
2. Calgary Board of Education. (2014) Tips from teachers: Create safety and routine. *Teaching refugees with limited formal education*. 1-8. Retrieved from <http://teachingrefugees.com/>
3. Crosby, S. D. (2015). An Ecological Perspective on Emerging Trauma-Informed Teaching Practices. *Children and Schools*, 37(4), 223–230. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1093/cs/cdv027>
4. Clinic Community Health Centre. (2013). Trauma-informed: The trauma toolkit. *The Trauma Toolkit*, 2, 1–150. Retrieved from www.trauma-informed.ca
5. National Child Traumatic Stress Network, & Schools Committee. (2017). Creating, supporting, and sustaining trauma-informed schools: A system framework. *The National Child Traumatic Stress Network*, 1–13. Retrieved from http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/creating_supporting_sustaining_trauma_informed_schools_a_systems_framework.pdf
6. <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/about-child-trauma>
7. Stewart, J., & Martin, L. (2018). *Supporting Newcomer and Refugee Youth BRIDGING Supporting Newcomer and Refugee Youth*. Retrieved from <https://ceric.ca/resource/bridging-two-worlds-supporting-newcomer-refugee-youth/>

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