

Helping Students Transition Back to School

Promoting Regulation

Recognizing and Naming Student Emotions

Students exposed to trauma and chronic stress often have difficulties controlling their emotions, and lack of self-regulation in a classroom setting is often raised as a major cause of concern by teachers about students. Teachers are critical to helping students learn how to recognize and regulate their emotions and behavior. The connection and trust built between teachers and students provides an opportunity for teachers to help students learn to recognize triggers and how to respond differently to their feelings. However, students cannot learn how to regulate their emotions if they are not able to name or identify the emotion. This can be learned and supported in a classroom setting.¹

Central to this domain is the ability for students to recognize and name their feelings and bodily states. We call this “the vocabulary of feelings” or “emotional literacy.”

When students recognize and name their feelings, they can create linkages between:

1. External experiences
2. Internal thoughts and feelings
3. Triggered behaviors

Students then learn how to respond to their emotions differently. This requires affect modulation.

Affect modulation is defined as calming down or revving back up after an arousal of an intense emotion. When students identify their emotions and triggers, the goal is to help students modulate their emotions so they can express them in an appropriate way for a classroom setting.



Recognizing the Need

Trauma treatment does not happen in a step-by-step approach. Each student brings unique characteristics, skills, exposure history, context, and presentation. By connecting with compassion, teachers can remove and help students remove triggers, but a student’s ability to recognize and name emotions can be lacking. These students may lack the vocabulary to recognize and express their emotions and the ability to use that vocabulary to learn how to modulate their responses. Therefore, understanding the challenges related to setting and mastering affective objectives as opposed to academic ones is critical to the student’s progress.

Goals for Instruction

- Students will be able to better recognize, name, and differentiate their feelings.
- Students will be able to create linkages between their feelings and internal and external experiences.
- Students will be able to better identify resources to safely express their feelings.
- Students will be able to modulate their responses to emotions that are conducive to an academic setting.

- Students will be able to self-regulate their feelings and behave appropriately.
- Students will be able to return to a comfortable emotional state after arousal of their emotions.
- Students will be able to show assertiveness skills necessary to direct their behavior towards a goal or activity they have chosen.
- Students will be able to succeed in academic learning by learning the strategies to use cognitive skills.
- Students will be able to use executive functions in daily classroom work.



Classroom Strategies

Teachers of the compassionate school model make every effort to create an environment where children feel safe exploring, naming, and sharing their feelings. Compassionate teachers seek to empower children by supporting them as they learn to identify and respond appropriately to triggers, they set high expectations for each child, and allow them to make choices. Below is a list of classroom strategies that can be considered to support children through this domain.

Classroom Strategies: Calm Zones and Safe Places

Children exposed to trauma and toxic stress may (re)experience physiological responses outside of their control. Students who begin to feel like they are not in control of their responses and reactions can benefit from having a designated “calm zone” or “safe place” in their classroom. A calm zone or safe place is a place where students can voluntarily move when they feel themselves getting out of control. This is not the same as time-out or seclusion, but rather a separate area children choose to go. This is a universal intervention to help every classroom student. The space is for any student who may be having a difficult day.

Creating a Calm Zone / Safe Place:

1. Identify an area of the classroom or office for the calm zone.
 - For younger students, this can be the corner of the classroom where you can situate pillows and blankets. It can be a more enclosed space like a pop up tent, a blanket over a table, or a canopy hanging from the ceiling.
 - For older students, work with the student resource team or school counselor and create a hall pass designated for a trip to the school safe zone in the counselor’s office or the main office. The administration should be involved in this plan.
2. Make sure the calm zone is properly sanitized between uses and provide hand sanitizer, fresh masks, gloves, and disinfecting wipes for students to use in the calm zone (both to promote safety and to help soothe anxiety about safety). If utilizing a separate space is not feasible, consider an in-place calm zone, such as allowing students to draw or journal at their desk, grab a toy from a calm zone box, or put in their earbuds to listen to music (after establishing how to do this with minimal distraction).
3. If your classes are fully or partially virtual, establish alternatives for a virtual calm zone. This could involve asking students to have a toy, coloring book, journal, or music player ready to use at home if they need a moment away from the virtual classroom, but make sure an age-appropriate plan is in place to ensure students are still accounted for if they utilize the virtual calm zone.
4. Create a soothing and calming ambience. Provide headphones that play calming music or a sound machine that plays soft natural sounds at a low tone. A soothing aromatherapy scent such as eucalyptus spearmint or lavender can also have a positive effect on mood.

5. Provide cognitive games for students to play while in the safe place. Games such as Rush Hour or the I Spy series can help move a child's brain from emotional thinking (the right) to more cognitive processing (the left).
6. Students should never receive repercussions for utilizing the calm zone. It should be an entirely separate space than time out areas. It is a choice the student can make without explanation or consequences.
7. As you observe and learn student patterns, try to isolate stimuli or the configuration of stimuli, when possible (i.e. put tennis balls on the legs of chairs if students are often startled by the sound of moving chairs, remove loud noises, challenges with specific tasks or class work, etc.).



Classroom Strategies: Emotional Literacy

Children and youth, particularly those exposed to trauma and toxic stress, may have difficulty processing and talking about emotions. The goal is to help children and youth become competent in regulating emotions by providing the tools to become more emotionally literate. We as human beings – students and teachers, alike – are often trained to put into words what we are thinking but less often what we are feeling. However, in order to navigate our thoughts and feelings, we must recognize the linkage between our emotions and behavior.

To alter our behavior, then, requires us to be able to recognize, name, and know how to respond to our feelings. This is a critical element of trauma treatment.

The table to the right shows categories of affect. The table is intended to describe:

1. How we feel
2. What one may be thinking when they feel that way
3. How they may act when they are displaying those feelings

Practice Using the Vocabulary of Feelings:

- Stop often to reflect on the affective dimensions of learning and teaching. First practice by doing this yourself, then begin to observe student behavior.
 - How are they acting?
 - What are they thinking?
 - What are the underlying feelings?

Category	Feeling	Thinking	Acting
Apathy	Overwhelmed, tired, cut off, defeated, despairing, discouraged, disillusioned, futile, and/or resigned.	It doesn't matter. I give up. What's the use? Why bother? It will never work. I can't. It's too hard. No matter what I do, it won't make a difference.	Indecisive, lazy, listless, negative, passive, stuck, careless, disassociated, forgetful, inattentive, and/or unresponsive.
Fear	Unsettled, nervous, startled, frightened, threatened, anxious, caged, skeptical, frantic, confused, distrusting, tense, doubtful, vulnerable, apprehensive, exposed, and/or terrified.	It's not safe. It's so confusing that I just can't move. I don't want anything to change. Disaster is looming and I've got to protect myself. What if I fail? What will they think?	Defensive, disturbed, mistrustful, nervous, timid, agitated, shady, traumatized, scared, irrational, distraught, secretive, and/or self-sabotaging.
Pride	Smug, judgmental, aloof, uncompromising, above it all, righteous, holier-than-thou, cool, condescending, and/or vain.	I knew that. I'm in a better place than you. I'm smarter than everyone else. It's your fault, not mine. I would never associate with those kinds of people. I'm not like them. I know this already. I'm better.	Dogmatic, aloof, boastful, sanctimonious, hypocritical, closed, stoic, false humility, patronizing, putting others down, and/or distant.
Anger	Frustrated, huffy, ticked-off, vengeful, perturbed, irritated, agitated, disturbed, sizzling, violent, upset, exasperated, livid, resentful, jealous, hateful, seething, infuriated, beside oneself, full of rage, hateful, and/or mad.	I'll get them. I'm not going to do what they want. Not a chance! Now you'll pay for that. I'll get even. Drop dead! Who do you think you are? I won't be pushed around like that!	abusive, sarcastic, resistant, belligerent, blinded, pushy, destructive, aggressive, ferocious, fierce, inflexible, malevolent, merciless, nasty, offensive, stubborn, and/or passive aggressive.
Tranquility	Serene, free, fulfilled, full of awe, complete, centered, aware, quiet, and/or peaceful.	This is just perfect. I am just fine with what is happening now. Everything is unfolding as it should. I'm enjoying this!	Balanced, centered, serene, connected, composed, quiet, and/or whole.

Adapted from Wolpov & Tonjes, 2006, p. 121

- Include emotional literacy activities throughout the day and continue to practice. Consider the following:
 - When reading a story with the class, pause to ask how the character may be feeling, what they are thinking, and how their emotions impact their behavior.
 - Share personal stories that express how you are feeling
 - Use metaphors, similes, and analogies to understand the level of emotion a child is feeling (Ex. Are you as angry as an exploding volcano? Are you as happy as a kid in a candy store with a pocket full of money? Does arguing with your mom feel as if you are wrestling with a pig in the mud?)
 - Utilize thermometers, pie charts, control knobs, or 1-10 scales to assess degrees of feeling. This is also a helpful technique to teach that feelings can come in all sizes and that subtle shifts in emotion can be difficult for everyone. See the last page of this packet for an example of a Stress Thermometer.

Questions to consider when processing strong emotions with students:

- How upset are you?
- Comparison: How angry were you then and how angry are you now?
- You say you were red hot! How hot would that be on this thermometer?
- Incorporate games that increase emotional literacy
- Connect feelings to thoughts and physiology. Children and youth exposed to trauma and toxic stress may have difficulty understanding the connection between their internal and external states. Work with children to identify the situations that lead to feelings of being out of control or acting inappropriately.



Classroom Strategies: Regulation Skills and Activities

Exposure to trauma and chronic stress leads to over-activation of the human stress response (the sympathetic nervous system). There are many different regulation activities that teachers and school staff can use to help students to calm their body and mind. Regulation is not one size fits all.

Identifying or finding the right activity that helps individual students regulate themselves can be a trial-and-error process. That can include calming activities, self-soothing, distractions, and pleasurable activities. Here are some activities that may help students:

Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR):

1. Physically relaxing your body can result in feelings of emotional calmness. When practicing these strategies, encourage students to turn off all electronic devices to reduce distractions.
2. Have students sit upright, with a straight spine and their feet flat on the floor. Arms and legs should not be crossed and eyes can be closed, if students feel comfortable with that.
3. Have students isolate one muscle group and create tension for 8 to 10 seconds. Have students let go of the tension and have the muscle relax. Follow the sequence below:

Feet --- Feet and legs --- Hands --- Hands and Arms --- Abdomen --- Chest --- Neck and Shoulders --- Face

4. Ask students to notice how the tension flows away as the muscles relax.

5. Once you have gone through the sequence, ask students to relax for a count of ten. Please note: Don't be surprised if students fall asleep during this exercise. This is normal and a sign of a state of relaxation.
6. Using a feeling thermometer or pie graph, ask students to share if there are any changes in how they feel.

PMR for Young Children:

- Stuffed Animal Breathing:** Have children lie down on their backs with a stuffed animal on their stomach. Ask the students to have the animal rise and fall with each deep breath.
- Robot/Rag Doll:** Children stiffen their muscles to walk like a robot. Then, the teacher tells them to relax their muscles like a rag doll.
- Spaghetti:** Ask children to move their limbs like cooked spaghetti, then have them stiffen their arms and legs like uncooked spaghetti.
- Bridges:** Have children raise their arms with each inhale and down with each exhale, like the London Bridges game.
- Giraffe/Turtle:** Children spread their arms and legs tall like a giraffe reaching for the highest branch on a tree, and then pretend to act like a turtle with their arms, legs, and head tightly compacted into their shells.
- Caterpillar/Butterfly:** Children move like a caterpillar still in their cocoon, then spread their wings to fly away.
- Doorway stretch:** For a count of ten, push with two arms against a doorframe. Release. Ask the students to notice the difference between how muscles feel during pushing and releasing.

Deep Breathing:

- Yoga:** Yoga encourages people to practice mindful breathing with movement.
- Belly Breathing:** Place one hand on your belly below your ribs and the other on your chest. Take a deep breath in through your nose and let your belly push your hand out for a count of 5. Hold your breath at the top of the inhale. Breathe out through pursed lips for an equal count of 5. Do this three to ten times.

References

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STRESS THERMOMETER

