

Helping Students Transition Back to School

Promoting Connections

Building Trust and Making Healthy Connections

Trauma is the result of stressful events or ongoing stressful situations that have affected one's sense of safety, making them feel vulnerable in their daily life. The uncertainty surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic and its social and economic impacts on families can corrode a student's sense of safety and stability. Students who have experienced trauma may have difficulty connecting with their teachers and classmates, especially via virtual learning systems or after an extended period of social isolation. However, students can learn to trust adults and peers and make healthy connections.

Learning trust and making healthy connections requires:

1. Consistency and integrity on the part of the teacher
2. Attunement on the part of the student so they can read teacher cues accurately
3. Opportunities to respond appropriately

Attunement is the ability to accurately read and respond to the cues of others. One of the goals of this domain is to improve teacher/student attunement.

Building student-teacher connections and fostering attunement may be more challenging in a virtual setting than in-person. Students may feel more hesitant to participate in class discussion or to reach out for help in a virtual setting, so teachers and school-based mental health providers may need to be more proactive about reaching out to students, monitoring student involvement and ensuring that all students have an opportunity to participate during class, and clarifying or repeating class material.



Recognizing the Need

Students who will benefit from learning these skills often appear withdrawn or “spacey.” They tend to seek attention from teachers. They have difficulty staying seated and focusing on tasks.

They may often avoid tasks or say “I can’t do it” when they are doing work. When they get in trouble, they often say that it is not their fault and can sometimes engage in teasing others. Their low academic skills often translate into low self-esteem. Their work can be disorganized or rigidly organized.

Goals for Instruction

- Students will improve their ability to become more attuned to themselves and the cues of others. They will then be able to accurately read the cues of others and respond to those cues in ways that allow for healthy connections and trusting relationships.
- Students will be able to demonstrate improved abilities to socialize with others in socially appropriate ways.
- Students will build on skills that foster community, mutual responsibility, and empathy.



Classroom Strategies

Students who have experienced trauma and toxic stress often learn to either be overly passive or aggressive. Therefore, in a classroom setting, students must learn to be assertive and vocalize thoughts to create more opportunities. Social skills are critical to interact with others in appropriate ways. Students who master this domain will be able to relate to peers, join small group work, get attention from adults in appropriate ways, and argue constructively with peers.

Classroom Strategies: Classroom Meetings

Children and youth exposed to trauma and toxic stress can be exposed to extreme stressors outside of school that can make them irritable, withdrawn, aggressive, or unable to focus. Providing structure and predictability in the form of regular classroom meetings can help address feelings of insecurity. Educators should evaluate the needs of their students to determine whether these meetings should happen weekly (every Monday morning), daily (every morning), or several times a day. These meetings provide educators with an opportunity to assess what students already know about racial trauma and/or COVID-19, correct misconceptions, and provide additional information, and provide students with an opportunity to share their feelings about and experiences with racial trauma and COVID-19-related stress, ask questions, and strengthen connections within the classroom. These meetings can be held in-person or virtually. If in-person, make sure you are following social distancing guidelines during classroom meetings, as some recommendations for facilitating classroom connections (like sitting in a circle facing each other) may not be suitable. For recommendations regarding classroom layouts during the COVID-19 pandemic, see [the CDC's "Considerations for Schools."](#)

When holding classroom meetings, whether in person or virtually, keep the following tips in mind:

1. Clearly explain that the purpose of the meeting is for students to share their thoughts, feelings, and questions about COVID-19, racial unrest, or other experiences they're currently facing, and that questions or complaints about assignments can be addressed in another setting.
2. Set an agenda for the meeting to provide structure. [Project Fleur-de-lis recommends](#) using the following agenda to guide meetings:
 - a. Opening quote
 - b. Brief introduction prompt if needed (go around to all participants)
 - c. Check-in prompt (go-around)
 - d. Follow up prompt or reflective question (go-around)
 - e. Gratitude prompt (go-around)
 - f. Check-out prompt (go around)
 - g. Closing quote
3. Set a talking order for go-arounds (alphabetical order, for example), which the teacher should keep track of. Students should not be pressured to share if they want to skip a particular prompt.
4. Create a set of shared agreements for classroom meetings that everyone agrees to honor. This could include agreements like "practice nonjudgement," "don't interrupt," and "be present." The first meeting can include time to brainstorm and outline the shared agreements.

5. Set an example for how to engage in the meeting, such as demonstrating attentive listening, providing support, and sharing your own responses to the meeting prompts.

For suggested discussion prompts, opening and closing quotes, and more recommendations, see [Project Fleur-de-lis's "Recommendations For Holding A Virtual Community Circle To Build Connection During COVID-19."](#)

Classroom meetings can also be used to have complex discussions about race, racism and discrimination. **The Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility** has developed some tip sheets, resources and lessons to facilitate discussions related to COVID-19, racism against Asians and the Black Lives Matter movement. The main website can be found at <https://www.morningsidecenter.org/>. Here some specific resources:

Tips Sheets:

- Countering Biased Response: <https://www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/lessons/coronavirus-countering-biased-responses>
- Guidelines for Stopping Oppressive Behavior: <https://www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/lessons/guidelines-stopping-oppressive-behavior>
- Teaching About Controversial or Difficult Issues: <https://www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/lessons/teaching-about-controversial-or-difficult-issues>

Lessons/Group Meeting:

- Fostering Empathy in and Interconnected World: <https://www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/lessons/coronavirus-fostering-empathy-interconnected-world>
- Student Voices on Covid and Black Lives Matter: <https://www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/lessons/student-voices-covid-and-black-lives-matter>

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