

# Building Racial Equity Through Trauma-Responsive Discipline

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**In these unprecedented times, educators need to strengthen their use of social-emotional, social justice, and culturally responsive practices.**

This current moment of civil unrest in the fight against systemic racism and police brutality underscores the need for schools to be responsive to students coping with trauma. It is a matter of equity and justice. As the historical ties between race, economic marginalization, and exposure to trauma once again rise to the surface, so does the need for educators to strengthen their use of social-emotional, social justice, and culturally responsive practices.

Layered on top of this historic unrest is the COVID-19 pandemic, which has already disproportionately impacted the well-being of students from marginalized groups. That said, the full scope of traumatic stress caused by COVID-19 won't be understood until in-person schooling is *well underway* because educators are on the frontlines of identifying, reporting, and responding to children's mental health needs.

As with the physical health effects (Reyes et al., 2020), we can expect that the mental health effects of the pandemic will hit Black Americans, and particularly Black children, the hardest. Black children will lose the most caregivers to this virus, experience the deepest plunge into poverty, and have the steepest climb to economic recovery. Additionally, research on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina tells us that many educators will perceive Black children's stress reactions as willful disobedience and respond with punitive discipline (Marsee, 2008).

Now more than ever, encouraging the use of *trauma-responsive* discipline with all students could go a long way toward reducing the harm that the racialized application of punitive and exclusionary discipline has on the education and life outcomes of Black and brown children.

I direct the Trauma Responsive Educational Practices (TREP) Project at the University of Chicago, where we have been inundated with questions about planning for this academic year. Educators in all positions are now realizing the urgency of attending to students' psychological and emotional needs—something for which most have received little training.

In early June, we hosted a one-day conference on how schools can respond to this emerging national mental health crisis.<sup>1</sup> As we emphasized, and as educators expressed concern about, the cognitive and emotional dysregulation some students are experiencing will manifest as externalized behaviors in the classroom, putting the physical and emotional safety of others at risk. Grief and loss, shame, and other feelings of vulnerability are sometimes communicated as anger and aggression.

## Defining Trauma-Responsive Discipline

Punitive discipline can *increase* this sense of vulnerability and result in an escalation of acting-out behaviors. Trauma-responsive discipline, on the other hand, prioritizes maintaining student dignity and ensuring that disciplinary interactions strengthen students' self-regulation capacities. I use the term "trauma-responsive" here because it frames the goal as moving from being *emotionally reactive* to being *developmentally responsive* to the needs of students coping with trauma.

Educators are reactive when their actions are determined by emotions that are triggered by a student's behavior. When this occurs, the reaction is often much more intense and punitive than is warranted by the immediate situation. Alternatively, educators are responsive when their actions engage their knowledge about trauma in ways that enable them to separate their triggered emotions from the developmentally supportive responses they display to students. They can then focus on pedagogical practices that will help students build their coping and self-regulation skills.

A trauma-responsive approach requires that educators:

*Be proactive*, because discipline is more effective when it is focused on planning ahead based on lessons learned from past behavioral challenges.

*Use positive behavioral corrections*, because discipline is more effective when it is focused on reinforcing the behaviors you want to see students display.

*Be relational*, because discipline is more effective when it is based on trust and the understanding that adhering to classroom expectations is an act of care rather than compliance.

*Use instructional discipline strategies*, because behavior is more likely to improve when students leave disciplinary interactions with learning experiences that strengthen their capacity to meet behavioral expectations.

Students who have had a history of frequent engagement with unsupportive environments outside of school often also have a history of defeating experiences inside of school. Such difficulties with negative experiences at school compound over time, resulting in a mutually reinforcing cycle of negative relationships and expectations between educators and students.

However, when educators provide consistent positive support to students, this cycle can be broken. Such support must be provided incrementally through daily interactions. When educators understand and respond with trauma-responsive discipline, students will begin to reorient their relationships with those educators and with the school.

## Two Core Aspects of Trauma-Responsive Educational Practices

Let's focus on two core components of trauma-responsive practices that apply to discipline and all other educator-student interactions—*emotional neutrality* and *co-regulation*. If practiced consistently, they can increase students' feelings of safety and reduce the likelihood that emotional distress will result in escalating educator-student conflicts.

### 1. Respond with emotional neutrality.

Your responses to challenging behaviors will be more effective when you can express emotional neutrality while implementing discipline. Emotional neutrality is about not taking the behavior personally. It involves understanding that although the escalation that is taking place does involve you, it is often about much more than just you, especially if the student has a history of trauma. Because of the student's decreased frustration tolerance, any minor agitation or frustration can be the pressure that breaks his or her already cracked dam, leading to an outpouring of emotion.

While emotional neutrality is essential to de-escalating challenging behaviors, it is not easy to maintain. Yet with practice, it can become a key part of your discipline approach. Emotional neutrality does not mean setting your emotions aside; instead, it asks that, as an educator, you:

Understand and mitigate your own triggers by maintaining awareness of your emotional state (thoughts and feelings) and physical state (heart rate, clenched muscles, etc.).

Depersonalize the student's behavior by asking yourself questions to help you reframe the behavior as a result of difficulties with emotional regulation or an attempt to satisfy an unmet need. For example, *What is making the student feel so unsafe that he needs to show aggression? What can I do to increase the student's trust in me in this moment? Is the student struggling with academic work that may be causing him to feel vulnerable?*

Ignore the surface-level words and behaviors and tune in to the student's underlying emotional distress by actively engaging empathy for what the student is attempting to communicate through his or her behaviors.

Emotional neutrality should be reserved for negative interactions. It is equally important to be emotionally engaged with positive interactions.

### 2. Practice co-regulation.

When a child's dysregulated behavior is met with co-regulation—consistently calming, regulating responses from a trusted adult—they can begin to learn how to self-regulate their thinking, emotions, and behaviors (see fig. 1). Co-regulation includes three components:

*Cultivating* a warm, responsive relationship with each student in your class by displaying care and affection.

*Structuring* the environment to make self-regulation manageable. Avoid providing vague behavioral expectations; offering unclear transition guidance between tasks and movement through the school; and requiring prolonged, quiet, seated work time.

*Teaching* and coaching self-regulation skills through modeling, instruction, opportunities for practice, and positive reinforcement of even modest progress.

**Figure 1. Putting Co-Regulation into Action**

|  | Elementary School  | Middle School  | High School   |
|--|--|--|---|
|  | <b>Provide ...</b>   |  |   |
| <b>Build a Warm, Responsive Relationship</b> | Consistent positive regard<br>Support and empathy in times of distress<br>Validation of emotional experiences<br>Responsivity to developmental needs |  |   |
|  | <b>Structure ...</b>   | <b>Structure ...</b>   | <b>Structure ...</b>  |
| <b>Modify and Adjust the Environment</b>     | Time and space to relax and calm down<br>Clear rules and consequences<br>Scaffolds for complex academic, behavioral, and social situations           | Time and space to relax and calm down<br>Monitoring to limit risk<br>Rules and consequences that incentivize good behavior | Time and space to relax and calm down<br>Limiting risk opportunities<br>Expectations and consequences that incentivize good behavior<br>Collaboration to identify supportive environments |
|  | <b>Teach ...</b>   | <b>Teach ...</b>   | <b>Teach ...</b>  |
| <b>Coach Self-Regulation Skills</b>          | Model conflict resolution<br>Calm-down strategies<br>Relaxation<br>Positive self-talk<br>Social flexibility  | Goal setting<br>Problem solving<br>Managing stress<br>Managing time<br>Organization<br>Planning                            | Complex decision making and problem solving<br>Skills for healthy relationships<br>Healthy stress management<br>Long-term goal setting  |

Significantly for this year, co-regulation *can* be adapted for remote learning, which requires a greater amount of self-regulated, self-initiated, and self-directed learning. Co-regulation is transmitted through interpersonal relationships, so students need to feel that they are part of a community of remote learners who are all struggling together to make the best of a difficult situation. Asynchronous and synchronous messages and check-ins can help ensure that no student feels alone in their attempt to keep up and stay motivated.

## An All-Staff Effort

It is important to realize that unconscious racial biases can also influence educators' interactions with students who are in a state of dysregulation. To counter racial biases in how educators tend to perceive the behavioral challenges of Black and brown children, especially during this period of elevated stress and emotional and behavioral dysregulation, schools must invest in building the racial awareness and capacity of *all* staff members to be supportive when students begin to show reactive aggression—stress-induced, poorly regulated, emotional distress (Marsee, 2008). As trauma researchers say, "Behavior is the language of trauma." Children will show you before they tell you that they are in distress.

However, few educators know how to *identify* and *respond* to traumatic stress behaviors in children. Therefore, most make determinations about behavior based on the belief that students have the full capacity to choose whether to follow the rules, so not doing so is largely understood as willful defiance that should be punished. This increases the likelihood of racial bias because educators tend to interpret the *same behavior* as more defiant when done by Black and brown children. Punitive discipline is reduced when educators are taught to perceive acting-out behavior through the lens of psychological and emotional dysregulation.

*Identify.* Whenever the student's behavior has a high level of emotional intensity, especially when the objective circumstances of the current situation should not elicit an emotional response, look beyond the surface behaviors to find out why the student is feeling anxious, agitated, or defensive.

*Respond.* How you respond depends on how early you identify that the student has been triggered. If identified early, the best response is naming and redirection; let the student know that "it seems like something may be making you anxious or upset," and then suggest they take a five-minute break using whatever calming strategies you have in place (like getting a drink of water or taking two laps around the building). If identified late and the student is in the middle of an emotional outburst, the only two goals are to: (1) let the student know that you understand they are upset and that you are here to support them, and (2) help them to regain calm. There will be plenty of time later to revisit the situation so you can unpack their triggers and discuss logical consequences.

This all-staff effort must include those tasked with discipline and security such as school resource officers, certain paraprofessional staff, and deans. We have seen in the schools that we coach to become trauma-responsive that it *is* possible to transform the role of discipline and security staff from the people that teachers call when they need someone to ratchet up the threat level, to the people that teachers call because they have the strongest de-escalating and calming effect on students. This can be done by providing all teachers and security staff with developmentally appropriate tools for engaging with children and youth in distress. The TREP Project's introduction to de-escalation is one helpful resource.<sup>2</sup>

Once the focus is on being responsive and not reactive, when the teacher reports that Marcus had a "bad day" on Tuesday, the security officer will be there to meet him at the door on Wednesday for a breakfast check-in, rather than being alerted to be ready to immediately remove Marcus from the classroom the next time he acts out. Such small changes in our understanding of what creates a sense of safety at school can have a dramatic impact on students' mental health.

## If Not Now, Then When?

For well-intentioned reasons, most educators want a quick return to standard procedures and protocols. It is comforting for adults to "get back to normal," and it is good for children to have structure in their lives after a crisis. However, the normalcy and structure that enable children to recover after a crisis is *not* a matter of pushing their emotional distress aside to focus on academic content.

The pandemic has created a context in which no educator can ignore the urgency of attending to students' social-emotional needs. Whether operating in-person, remotely, or in a hybrid context, the schools that succeed will be the ones that put mental health and well-being at the center of all policies and practices. They will be ones that help students make meaning of this disaster and process the psychological, emotional, and spiritual wounds that are sure to linger.

We acted too late to prevent COVID-19 from transforming every aspect of American society and were initially blind to the ways systemic racism will determine who will survive this crisis. But it's not too late to prevent widescale psychological trauma and mitigate the racially disproportionate mental health effects the pandemic will have on children.

## Fixing School Policing

**One of the most racially disproportionate and re-traumatizing education policies is stationing police officers in schools.** Especially during this period of massive budget shortfalls, districts should not be allowed to continue paying millions of dollars for a practice that has shown to at best have no effect on safety (Stern & Petrosino, 2018) and at worst harm children's life outcomes (The Sentencing Project, 2013).

The presence of police officers is especially damaging in districts like Chicago, where 36 percent of students are Black and 47 percent are Latinx (Advancement Project, 2018). Having police officers in schools increases the likelihood of students being shuttled into the juvenile justice system for minor offenses like fighting and theft (Nance, 2016). Because police officers are more likely to be in urban, mostly minority areas, students who would be counseled if they were white and privileged enough to live in affluent suburbs, are instead criminalized because they are Black, brown, and poor.

As educators, we should care about the negative effects this has on students' academic outcomes, as highlighted in two recent studies. One study examining Texas schools noted that "negative school discipline experiences could shape the way that students are perceived by teachers, school administrators, and peers, and may also affect a student's confidence and attachment to school" (Weisburst, 2019). A second study of New York schools found that "high rates of direct or indirect contact with police may also create stress and other health and emotional responses that undermine cognitive performance" (Legewie & Fagan, 2019).

In some districts, there are more school police officers and security staff than there are counseling staff (Barnum, 2016). In Houston, for example, there is one police officer per 785 students but only one counselor per 1,175 students. Now more than ever, distressed children need to be supported by a school counselor or social worker, rather than demonized by a police officer.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Recordings from the [TREP Project's virtual conference](#) can be accessed.
- <sup>2</sup> The TREP Project's "[Intro to Trauma Responsive De-Escalation](#)" can be accessed.

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