

# Meeting Student Trauma with an Asset-Based Approach

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## **Students living in adverse circumstances often lack positive recognition in schools.**

Many of the educators we work with in professional development sessions are surprised to learn that 47.5 percent of the nation's students have experienced one or more types of trauma, violence, or chronic stress in the form of abuse, neglect, parental loss, or mental illness (Data Resource Center for Child and Adolescent Health, 2013). These realities are sobering to hear. However, there is a path forward for these students—one that educators can help create. Research in psychology, psychiatry, education, social work, and education overwhelmingly shows the positive impact that a strengths-based approach can have in supporting the long-term success of students experiencing trauma.

Here are four evidence-based practices we recommend based on our review of the aforementioned research and our work with educators (Zacarian, Alvarez-Ortiz, & Haynes, 2017). These practices promote classroom and school environments that capitalize on students' individual strengths, including those that they possess inherently as well as the ones they have developed as a result of facing adversity.

## **1. Build Asset-Based Relationships with Students**

Students who live in traumatic, violent, and toxically stressful situations might be less likely to recognize their strengths and capacities and may not have experienced consistent, reliable, and trusting relationships. This can impact their ability to trust others.

Using a strengths-based approach requires that educators support students in drawing from their strengths to develop the skills, competencies, and confidence to be active learners, independent and critical thinkers, and contributing members of their learning community. Empathetic educators know who their students are, and this helps build and strengthen relationships and personalize interactions. They can get to know their students better by sensitively asking questions such as: *How do you spend your time after school or on weekends? Tell me about a teacher you really liked and why. Tell me about something that has been difficult in your life.*

Mr. Lyman,<sup>1</sup> a middle school teacher we worked with, adapted the third question to: *Tell me something that has been difficult for you during the COVID-19 pandemic and how you are coping.* During his office hours on Google chat, one student shared that his grandmother had died in a nursing home and that he felt terrible that he and his family had not been allowed to be with her. The same student shared that he had been doing his best to comfort his mother. Mr. Lyman responded in a way that highlighted the students' strengths and assets. "You are showing such compassion and caring for your mom," he said.

Another example of a strengths-based practice is to give a personalized greeting as students enter the classroom, whether in-person or remotely. This gives teachers the opportunity to highlight individual qualities that they have observed in each of their students. For example, Mr. Lyman says, "Good morning, Josh. Great to see you after that tough class debate yesterday. I definitely saw how determined you were in defending your position."

Building a positive, asset-based relationship with students living with adversity also requires that we communicate, in our words and deeds, that they are valued and competent individuals, that they belong in our classrooms and schools, and that they are emotionally and physically safe when they are with us. Providing students with evidence that validates their personal qualities also provides a model for all to emulate in their interactions with others. For instance, while students are engaged in group work, a teacher can carefully observe and tell a student, "I can see that you're showing respect to your team members by listening to what they're saying."

Asset-based language should permeate *all* interactions with students and others. Teachers can do this by offering modeling, learning, and practice opportunities, with the intention that everyone uses this same type of positive

communication as they learn, socialize, and collaborate together.

## 2. Encourage Student Voice and Choice

Classroom environments should provide a variety of opportunities for students living with trauma to build their confidence and capacity to speak up, address issues, take risks, and make decisions about things that matter to them. For example, do you involve your students and ask for their input when designing the appearance of your classroom? By encouraging students' voice and choice on a task like this one, teachers help students be involved in decisions that impact their learning.

Mrs. Hodges did this with her 10th grade U.S. history class by asking students to contribute additional classroom design ideas for meeting their school's COVID-19 safety measures. As students brainstormed various desk arrangement designs for the required six-foot distancing, she encouraged their creativity and choice. Mrs. Hodges also works in a community where many students have a friend or family member who fell ill with COVID-19 or who died from it. She asked students to explore the reasons why some communities are more affected than others and the relationship to social justice issues and health and well-being.

Mrs. Hodges tapped into her students' creativity by tasking them to plan a presentation of their findings using whatever means they chose. One group crafted a letter to their city officials expressing concern about the inequities they found in their community. Another group interviewed a health care provider and presented the interview in video format to the class. Encouraging students' voice and choice is essential for students living with adversity, as it allows them to be empowered and have control in matters that are relevant to their lives.

## 3. Connect the Curriculum to Students' Lives

Students living with adversity might not always feel that they are seen or heard. It is therefore important to use literature and literary examples that are socially relevant to students' experiences. In an article in the *New York Times* opinion section, author Christopher Myers (2014) described the sense of self-love that comes from recognizing yourself in a text. Students gain an understanding that their life and the lives of people like them are worthy of being told, discussed, and celebrated. Children, according to Myers, "create, through the stories they're given, an atlas of their world, of their relationships to others, of their possible destinations."

Mrs. Robinson, a kindergarten teacher, read aloud to her class the book *A Chair for My Mother* by Vera B. Williams (Scholastic, 1982) to demonstrate how a family and community come together after a traumatic event. She selected this book after a family in her school experienced a fire in their home. The story is about a little girl named Rosa whose mother works in a diner. Rosa goes to the diner after school and helps her mother by filling saltshakers and ketchup bottles, for which the diner owner pays her a small amount. Every night Rosa puts what she earns in the jar and her mother adds the change from her tips. Rosa's grandmother also adds a few coins to the jar. After a fire burns down their house, neighbors and relatives donate some furniture. However, Rosa's mother doesn't have a comfortable chair to sit on after she comes home very tired from work. Rosa and her grandmother use the money they saved to buy a comfortable armchair for Rosa's mother.

The book shows how friends, family members, and neighbors work together and support each other in the face of adversity. After reading the book aloud, Mrs. Robinson asked her students to think about a time when their family members and neighbors worked together to address a problem, draw a picture of the event, and share it with their classmates.

Autobiographies, biographies, memoirs, and diaries also provide rich examples of the challenges that real people have faced and overcome. While biographies of luminaries such as Anne Frank and Martin Luther King Jr. are traditional examples, there are countless others that depict the many types of adversities and challenges that humans experience. An example is Malala Yousafzai's autobiography *I Am Malala* (Little, Brown and Company, 2013), which depicts her

courageous attempt to pursue girls' rights to education at great personal risk from the Taliban. Another is Supreme Court justice Sonia Sotomayor's autobiography, *My Beloved World* (Vintage, 2014), in which she describes the many challenges that she faced, including witnessing her father's battles with alcoholism, on her journey to become the first Latina Supreme Court justice.

## 4. Ensure That Routines and Practices Are Consistent and Predictable

According to Blaustein (2013), using the same routines and rituals in our classroom activities allows students living with trauma to downshift from a fearful state where unpredictability takes control to a calmer, more predictable, and positive one. In our COVID-19 era, every teacher must take time to support students' feelings of safety and ensure they know what to expect in school and virtually as schools transition from in-person to remote or a hybrid model of learning.

Additionally, it is critical that students living with adversity be supported as they transition from one activity to another. For example, 6th grade teacher Mrs. Hernandez begins each school day with a mini lesson on self-care to support her students' health and well-being. She does this by introducing the purpose of the lesson and modeling what she wants students to do. She provides small group prompts such as: "I make sure I take a break from the computer by ...", "I try to exercise routinely by ...", and others, and she models a response. She then separates students into small groups, tasking each to discuss their responses and create a two-minute presentation that represents their group's discussion.

This routine has taken place in-person and virtually. As students collaborate in the classroom, Mrs. Hernandez visits each group and acknowledges the personal assets they display as they work. During virtual classes, she posts a screen message to each group, signaling students that it is time to start wrapping up their small-group work and rejoin the larger group. Creating routines that students can count on, whether they are learning virtually or in school, provides a learning environment that is predictable and promotes harmony.

By the nature of their adverse experiences, students living with trauma, violence, and chronic stress are less likely to have their many individual strengths be recognized. We can support these students to experience trusting relationships and to be accepted, acknowledged, and more in control of their surroundings. Educators can do this by intentionally using these four practices to promote a learning environment where students living with adversity feel empowered, valued, competent, and safe, as well as cognizant of their endless potential and remarkable personal strengths.

### Reflect & Discuss

- > In what ways can you and your school more strongly emphasize the strengths and assets of all students, especially those living with trauma?
- > How can your school provide a sense of safety and predictability in routine amidst any new health rules and regulations?
- > Does your curriculum relate to your students' realities and experiences? If not, how can you adjust it to be more relevant to their lives?

## References

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## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> All teacher names in this story are pseudonyms.

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