



## Podcast 1 Script: Trauma-Informed Strategies for Elementary and Adolescent Students

Today we're going to touch on behaviors that could be consistent with childhood trauma, and discuss a few strategies you can adopt to help these children overcome their burdens.

Trauma can negatively impact every aspect of a person's life, beginning with their ability to learn effectively, so it's critical that educators be able to recognize the signs of trauma. According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 'trauma' might be a frightening, dangerous, or even violent event that has threatened a child's life or physical safety. For that matter, merely witnessing an event that threatens the life or security of a loved one can be traumatic, especially for young children who depend on their attachment figures to feel safe themselves. Only a licensed clinician can diagnose your students, but you can familiarize yourself with Adverse Childhood Experiences, also referred to as ACEs, and the signs of trauma from ACEs that you may see in your students.

Take Michael, for example, an elementary student in an afterschool program. Compared to his classmates, Michael seems withdrawn and cries every day. The teacher has tried several different ways to connect with him, but he wants nothing to do with her or any of the other kids in the room. If there are loud noises, he jumps, puts his hands over his ears and runs to a corner of the room. Then, during an art activity, he draws a monster-like figure terrorizing smaller figures. When the instructor asks Michael to explain his drawing, he says it's a picture of his dad screaming at him and his mom, and they're scared.

You can probably think of students in your program, whether in the past or now, that have acted like Michael. Maybe they truly have ADHD or another mental health condition, but it's also possible that the effect that trauma has had on this student has been misread. What should you be looking for? For starters, does the student seem anxious, or actually verbalize worries about themselves or others? Do you see a change in how distressed, irritable or moody they are? Is the student absent more than usual, or are they unable to concentrate when they ARE there? Do they over-react, or even UNDER-react to loud noises such as fire alarms? Are they aggressive with other students or throw tantrums out of nowhere? These are only a few of the kinds of behaviors that a child who has been through trauma might show in the classroom or afterschool program. Other signs might be aggression toward you or their peers, they might complain of pains like headaches or stomach aches, or maybe act impulsively or take risks that you don't see other students taking. Observing numerous of these changes is of particular concern.

Now let's consider Hannah's story. Hannah is fourteen and although she used to be outspoken and had lots of friends, recently she is withdrawn and quiet. She's missing school, and her teacher saw her on the corner smoking with different kids than she used to hang out with. During a writing activity, Hannah writes a poem that alludes to violence in the home and in her neighborhood. Keep in mind that for older students, trauma-induced behaviors may also be misidentified as teenage hormonal changes, or assumed to be the result of one of the many mental health conditions that can surface at this phase of life. Some teens may exhibit bold shifts in behavior, while others may demonstrate a seemingly more inward shift in personality like Hannah. And while all of the behavior changes that trauma can cause in elementary age students are possible for older students, you might also see experimentation with drugs or alcohol, signs of self-harm,

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such as repetitive, pattern-like cut scars on their limbs, or significant changes in academic performance.

There are several trauma screening and assessment tools such as the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) checklist and the Resilience checklist, both of which can be found at [www.cestooohigh.com](http://www.cestooohigh.com). As we mentioned, a certified therapist should be making these official diagnoses, but these are valuable resources you to start to understand and appreciate what some of your students might be going through. Also check with your institution for protocol in case you think a student might be experiencing trauma that is unreported.

For now, let's move on to what you CAN do as an educator. There are strategies that can be implemented in your afterschool program to support any student having a moment where they are unable to control their emotions. One of our favorites is affectionately called, "Hot chocolate breathing." In this exercise, students pretend to hold a mug and savor the good smell of the hot chocolate while they slowly inhale. Then they slowly exhale to cool it off. This helps students develop good breathing techniques, practice self-soothing, and provides them with a positive image. Another strategy is to use a smooth worry stone that is easily held. Have students move their thumb back and forth over the surface of the stone while focusing on a mantra or motivating affirmation that helps release tension and bring about a sense of calmness. Work with students to develop their own unique mantras, like "I am awesome everyday" or "Every day is a new start." Let's get into some practical strategies to help address trauma's significant impact on cognition and learning for students at all grade levels. Students who have experienced trauma may struggle with school assignments, including writing. They may show difficulty organizing their thoughts on paper, and graphic organizers can help. Graphic organizers help students to jot down ideas they are interested in writing or talking about. Let students choose pictures OR words to record their ideas in the organizers for faster and easier retention. These can represent facts, terms or ideas. Templates for pre-developed graphic organizers can be found at [ReadWriteThink.org](http://ReadWriteThink.org).

For younger students like Michael, language development is an area that can be severely impacted by trauma. This could mean trouble with expressive language, meaning writing and speaking, or receptive language, meaning listening and reading. Activities for a student like Michael should involve spoken language that is scaffolded and repeated often. Older students like Hannah may be no exception. She may also have language impairments, or be suffering academically because of attention, memory or recall problems. Students who have poor short-term memory or recall skills can benefit from activities that help to build vocabulary and develop sequential skills.

In this discussion around language deficits, there are a number of additional strategies for you to consider. Give kids verbal prompts to resolve conflicts with peers. So often they just can't find the words to develop these skills. Work with them to write or discuss an area of personal interest for two or three minutes. This can improve their expressive language substantially if it's something THEY care about, especially if you prompt them to connect this subject to other topics too. Have them reverse the order of events in a familiar story. This can help younger students build receptive language and retrieve information from their memory, and older students practice note taking and comprehend content level text that's more complex than narratives. These are just a



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few language-based exercises or strategies that might help students who have experienced trauma overcome some of their educational obstacles.

Bibliotherapy, or the use of books to indirectly solve problems, is another strategy that could have profound impact in your program. The way we relate to books offers an intimate human connection that demands nothing of us, the reader. You can teach appropriate social and developmental skills as a response to situations that book characters encounter. These skills might include creating and fostering friendships, hard work, and spreading kindness. Older students can be guided through normal and predictable stages of adolescent development and learn what to expect by reading about how other teenagers have dealt with typical situations. They can also benefit from books that have storylines similar to their own, possibly unusual experiences involving trauma. But be sensitive to subject matter and stick to a one-on-one setting for delicate topics.

The last thing we want to cover today is how you can support your students who may have experienced trauma by helping them develop grit, resilience and a growth mindset instead of a fixed mindset centered on hopelessness. 'Grit,' is a term you are likely to hear a lot around the subject of trauma-informed practices, and it refers to perseverance and passion for long-term goals. You will also hear about, 'resilience' which refers to the ability to get back up when you've been knocked down, or come back fighting stronger after a loss. Always impress upon your students that their success in this arena is the effort itself. That said, teach students to develop and use positive language. Instead of "messaging up," show them how to acknowledge that even if they didn't quite get something the first time, their effort and opportunity to try again should be celebrated. Teach them how to develop flexible thinking patterns. By being flexible, instead of seeing the world in black and white, they can look for opportunities to grow and learn among the many shades of gray. These students need special guidance in setting goals. Show them how breaking down big projects into mini goals can make big ideas manageable. Homework in an afterschool program is the perfect opportunity for this lesson. Finally, you can build relationships with your students by appropriately share your OWN challenges with them. Our social media world might be robbing them of a true picture of the challenges other kids are facing. But you can assure them that they're not alone.

We hope this podcast has given you a good basis for recognizing students who may be experiencing trauma and determining some ideas on how to best support them. For more information on how trauma impacts student learning and for more strategies that can be implemented in your program, please visit the Tools section for this Click and Go.