

# Helping Students Transition Back to School

## Promoting Safety

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### Recognizing the Need

When children who have experienced trauma or toxic stress feel unsafe or threatened, their freeze-fight-flight-fright response can be triggered. Once triggered, children can behave in ways that are disruptive, oversensitive, numb, hostile, or aggressive. This interferes with the student's ability to focus on classroom assignments; process, organize, and store new information; and communicate and connect with others. Teachers can do a lot to ensure their classroom environment is safe for all of their students. Teachers who are attuned to their students' needs can support a student as they identify and manage their trigger response. Below is a list of potential signs that may appear when a student does not feel safe in their school climate:

- Behaviors can take the form of aggression or withdrawal.
- Changes in routine may trigger unexpected behaviors. The anticipation of an unsafe situation can lead a student to feel threatened and preemptively act out at the person who may instigate change – a teacher, other students, or caregiver.
- Normal classroom occurrences can startle students and cause feelings of danger (Ex. Teacher raising their voice in anger, fire alarm, classroom discussion, etc.)

### Goals for Instruction

- Students will be given opportunities to feel safe and assured through predictable routines. They will be able to identify elements of the classroom that validate their well-being.
- Students will be able to name triggers that initiate the fight-flight-fright response that distracts them from focusing and learning.
- With the support of their teachers, students will either remove trigger stimuli or respond to those stimuli differently.

### Classroom Strategies

The security of being in a safe environment is necessary to focus on learning. When students and teachers feel safe in their classroom, there are more opportunities for healthy connections, positive interactions, and development. The following classroom strategies can be used to assure that students feel safe, emotionally and physically.



### Classroom Strategies: Practice Safe Behavior

Regularly remind students of the ways they can practice safety at school and at home like staying six feet away from others, avoiding touching their face, wearing masks, and washing hands properly and frequently. Use age-appropriate approaches to encourage safe behavior.

1. Adults should serve as an example for students of what appropriate behavior looks like (for example, keeping your mask on at all times, washing your hands or using hand sanitizer regularly, etc.). Model safe behavior for your students and make it clear that adults have to follow the same guidelines.
2. Encourage children to wash their hands thoroughly for at least 20 seconds by using tricks to make the process fun, such as:
  - a. Singing the A-B-C song or another 20-second song while they wash
  - b. Teaching the Wash My Hands song to remind them of proper handwashing techniques (to the tune of Row Your Boat):
    - i. *Wash, wash, wash my hands / Make them nice and clean.*  
*Rub the bottoms, and the tops / And fingers in between.*
  - c. Making it a game by seeing who can create the most soap bubbles
  - d. Emphasizing the importance of handwashing through worksheets, quizzes, and activities from the Scrub Club (<https://www.scrubclub.org/activities-kids/>) and awarding Scrub Club Hero certificates (<https://www.scrubclub.org/become-hero/>) for students that complete the activities and pass the Scrub Club Handwashing Knowledge Quiz ([https://www.scrubclub.org/documents/sc\\_handwashing\\_quiz.pdf](https://www.scrubclub.org/documents/sc_handwashing_quiz.pdf))
3. Inspire mask-wearing by:
  - a. Making time for students to personalize and decorate their masks together (while wearing another mask so safety is maintained during the decorating process).
  - b. Using imagination. If a student or students start to get restless over their mask wearing, tell them to pretend they are doctors or nurses and have to wear a mask while they take care of a stuffed animal or doll (ensuring any toys are either for personal use or have been properly sanitized). Additionally, consider asking children to put masks on their stuffed animals and dolls (size permitting) and use this as an opportunity to discuss why mask-wearing is important and how it keeps everyone safe.
  - c. Using creative activities, like asking children to draw masks on characters in coloring books
  - d. Keeping extra masks on hand for when students lose their own or need a fresh mask
4. Teach kids proper COVID-19 safety through computer games like "[Can You Save the World?](#)"



## Classroom Strategies: Talk About Safety

Make time to talk to students about their experiences and feelings around the pandemic, what they know about it, and what questions they have.

1. Check in regularly but don't push. It's important that students know that you are available to talk about their concerns and that you want to hear their concerns, but they might need a break from pandemic talk sometimes.
2. Find out what students already know and take the opportunity to answer questions, correct misconceptions, and offer reassurance based on their lead. Ask what they've heard, what they think about it, how they feel about it, and if they have any questions. Stay informed so that you can answer students' questions accurately.

3. Give students the chance to share their feelings and validate those feelings. Convey that it is normal for students to be struggling emotionally with their experience of the pandemic and for that to affect their experience at school, and provide caregivers and students with mental health resources or connect them to additional supports if needed.
4. Set a positive example by acknowledging your own feelings while remaining calm and relaxed. Be mindful of the message your body language and tone send.
5. When talking to students about COVID-19, it is important to encourage responsible behavior without inspiring panic or anxiety. Talking to children about the coronavirus is a balancing act between messages that can increase anxiety (“Don’t go outside or you’re going to get sick!”) and messages that can minimize the issue (“Don’t worry, everything is fine”). Express the importance of taking safety measures, but if students start to feel anxious or overwhelmed by the idea of getting sick, remind them that most people with the virus have mild symptoms and recover. Provide balanced messages like “children are not getting it as badly as older people, but you still have to be careful.”
6. Be reassuring but honest. If a student is anxious about the idea of getting sick, walk through the steps that would be taken to keep them safe and healthy if they did get sick. Use reassuring language like “no one in our class has symptoms right now; we’re safe and will keep on staying safe.” Remind students that you and other adults have taken steps to keep them safe and that their safety is your priority, which is why the normal experience of school may be different for a while.
7. Be mindful of misinformation and blaming, and correct it when you hear it, whether it’s coming from a student, another adult, or an authority figure in the news. For example, avoid and confront using stigmatizing labels such as “Chinese Virus” or “Wuhan Virus.”
8. Use interactive tools, resources, and books to teach students about COVID-19 and help them process their thoughts and feelings about it. A good example for young children is [A Kid's Guide to Coronavirus](#) by Rebecca Grove, MSW, LCSW, and Julia Martin Burch, PhD, and illustrated by Viviana Garofoli, and a good example for tweens and teens is [Unstuck! 10 Things to Do to Stay Safe and Sane During the Pandemic](#) by Bonnie Zucker, PsyD.



## Classroom Strategies: Dealing with Triggers

Children exposed to traumatic events or toxic stress can be reminded of past experiences in a variety of ways. In this section, we outline classroom strategies to help teachers name and address students’ triggers to help assure a safe learning environment for all students. A **trigger** is defined as “any stimulus that acts as a reminder of past overwhelming experiences, and leads to the same set of behaviors or emotions that originally developed as an attempt to cope with that experience.”<sup>22</sup> They can be internal (hunger, stress, anxiety) or external (yelling, loud sounds, smells). Students may have developed new triggers specific to the pandemic, their experience of quarantining at home, or their observations or experiences of police brutality throughout the recent Black Lives Matter protests. These may include triggers around masks (wearing them or not wearing them), coughing, sneezing, sniffing, crowds, bathrooms, arguments, chaos, loud noises, sirens, and more.

### Seven Steps to Dealing with Triggers:

1. Do not take student behavior personally. Acknowledge that the student’s behavior may be a response to a traumatic event that is greater and more complicated than what is occurring in the classroom.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- What was the function of the student's behavior?
  - Was it to defy us personally?
  - Was the intent of the student's behavior to somehow cope with a perceived danger?
2. Acknowledge and respect boundaries. You do not need to know all of the details of a student's history to respond with compassion. Respond to each student with care and concern to assure safety and trust. Model appropriate behavior by responding with respect and support.
  3. Assume that there is a connection between some stimulus (or configuration of stimuli) in the classroom and the complex behavior of the student.
  4. Consider how the stimulus or configuration of stimuli represents a threatening feeling or memory in the student. Triggers are complicated, so it may take some additional investigation. Triggers can be external, internal, or a combination of both. A student's response is often reflexive, not reflective.
  5. Help to remove the trigger, whenever possible. This can be done by providing the student with choices.

This can be done in three ways:

- Remove the stimulus
  - Help the student remove the stimulus
  - Assist the student to learn how to respond to the stimulus in a different way (Note: This will be covered in greater detail in Domains Two and Three.)
6. Model compassionate behavior with all students, not only students you know have a history of trauma. Take explicit steps to reduce any residual stress (embarrassment, shame, humiliation, teasing, harassment, threats of violence) in the classroom. Model compassion by showing unconditional acceptance, respect, and reason. Increase opportunities to connect and help others.
  7. Monitor student progress and offer alternatives as necessary. Discuss and debrief with colleagues and student support staff.



## Classroom Strategies: Setting Routines and Transition Plans

Uncertainty around our personal and collective futures has been a significant factor in the experience of the global health crisis. Unpredictability and instability can often be a trigger for memories of trauma and chronic stress. The anticipation of a new activity or transition may trigger students since something new involves risk. Minimize the effects of unpredictability by providing consistent routines, time scheduled and classroom traditions.

1. Since changes in routines are likely to occur as schools adjust to the new normal and update policies based on the status of the pandemic in the surrounding community, make sure that changes in routines are announced with plenty of time to prepare students for the change. If providing advance notice is not possible, make sure students have the opportunity to ask questions and express concerns when changes are announced, and empathize with the difficulty of adapting to these changes.

2. Communicate regularly with students about the school's plans and policies for the transition back to school, even if you're just reiterating an existing plan or confirming that current policies are remaining in place, so that a lack of updates is not interpreted as a lack of preparation.
3. For younger children, avoid triggering reactions by presenting a preview of a transition (for example, routinely play the same music and allow students the length of the song to transition). Isolate stimuli, when possible (i.e. put tennis balls on the legs of chairs if students are often startled by the sound of moving chairs). Be consistent and provide opportunities for students to prepare for transitions.
4. If students are struggling with keeping their masks on for extended periods of time, remind them of when they will next have the chance to take it off, whether that be during a designated snack break, recess, lunch, etc. Ensure you are always adhering to local and school guidelines when communicating mask-wearing guidelines to students.
5. Create daily routines that incorporate calming exercises, time for connection, and safety practices. These can include breaks for stretching, breathing, handwashing, check-ins, and mask breaks (with proper precautions in place).



## Classroom Strategies: Safety Plans

Creating a sense of safety may need to be explicit and coordinated with others. Developing a written safety plan allows teachers to help students remove stimuli that lead to inappropriate behavior. The goal of the safety plan is to create opportunities for students to control their environment and cope with negative emotions. The process helps students to begin to name and identify their own triggers. Safety plans can also be used to remind students of the proper behavior for maintaining a safe environment during the COVID-19 crisis, such as wearing masks, maintaining social distance, washing hands thoroughly and frequently, etc.

### Creating Safety Plans:

1. Safety plans can be created universally for the classroom or with individual students. The first step is to observe classroom patterns and behaviors to try to reduce triggers and create a safer classroom environment.
  - Students with IEPs affected by trauma should have written safety plans that the student support team, teachers, and caregivers or guardians agree to.
  - Students without IEPs can also benefit from having a safety plan.

Ex) A 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher noticed one of her student's affect changing significantly in certain situations. She believed something was going on, internally or externally, but couldn't quite isolate the stimuli that triggered the student.
2. Include the student, the student counselor, and members of the student support team (when applicable) in the creation of the safety plan. In addition, be sure to advise the administration of any and all plans.

Ex) The 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher engaged the student and the school counselor to develop a safety plan. They agreed to have a special hall pass to visit the counselor's office when the student began to feel angry or anxious.
3. Ensure the safety plan is age appropriate and meets the needs of the student.

- Hall pass to the counselor's office: Create special hall passes that allows students to visit the counselor's office. Make sure the passes are either properly sanitized between use, or create disposable passes.
  - Create a "calm zone" or "safe zone" for students to voluntarily move to when they are beginning to feel out of control
  - Responsible parties peer model: This strategy is most effective at the secondary level. When the student appears calm, the student and the teacher can select two or three peers (responsible parties) that can help keep a student calm when triggers arise. Have an area where students can talk or allow them to step out of the classroom for a moment.
4. Obtain administrative support and include other staff, when applicable

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