

10 Simple Steps for Reducing Toxic Stress in the Classroom



[JIM HICKMAN](#) 11/27/19 1:44 PM

As the brain science on adverse childhood experiences evolves, teaching must, too

By Jim Hickman & Kathy Higgins

We all know that when children aren't well, they're less likely to learn.

More and more teachers recognize that children who can't sit still in class, act out, or have asthma may be showing warning signs of a toxic exposure to childhood trauma.

More than two decades ago, landmark research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser Permanente found that exposure to adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs—ranging from parental addiction to abuse, neglect, or divorce—can have lasting effects on children's health. These ACEs can lead to abnormal levels of stress hormones—a condition known by doctors as toxic stress, which increases kids' risk of serious illnesses including asthma and diabetes, as well as long-term problems including heart disease and cancer later in life.

But the science also tells us that two things are clear: Early intervention improves outcomes, and safe, stable, nurturing relationships can be healing for children. With nearly 35 million children across the country at risk for toxic stress, what if the person giving the biggest daily dose of healing treatment for toxic stress isn't a doctor or a therapist, but a teacher?

As education researchers have found, stress can change brain architecture, making it more difficult for children to focus and learn. When a child's fight or flight response is constantly triggered by adverse experiences such as abuse or neglect, the child's nervous systems can become dysregulated, which can also affect thinking, decisionmaking, emotional control, and learning. This makes it more likely that children will experience negative academic outcomes such as poor grades, an increased risk of suspensions, or dropping out of school all together.

Although scientists used to think the brain circuitry was "set" around age 6, they have recently found the brain is malleable well into the 20s. As such, the brains of students who've experienced trauma can also be "rewired" for greater connection and feelings of security. To do so, it's essential to design an education system that takes into account our new knowledge of the developing brain. One of the most important findings is that for students who've experienced trauma and adversity, caring, secure relationships, and trust can restore their ability to learn.

How might schools incorporate these important findings? Teachers want to offer social-emotional learning, but many are unsure how to do so. Here are 10 practical, low- or no-cost strategies for turning things around:

1. Immerse your school in trauma-informed approaches. Such approaches focus on infusing the values of safety, trust, collaboration, choice, empowerment, and equity into all learning environments. Trauma-informed teaching is less about following a checklist than adopting a new way of doing business as a school.

2. Create a positive school climate that offers long-term, secure relationships between teachers and students. These relationships support academic, physical, cognitive, and social-emotional development—an approach known as whole-child education—that can help children overcome trauma and toxic stress.

3. Incorporate practices that address belonging and safety. Neuroscientists have found kids need a feeling of safety and connection in order to thrive. As a recent Edutopia video series on how learning happens demonstrates, something as simple as greeting children at the door each day with a hug, high-five, or handshake can help develop an atmosphere of trust, safety, and caring.

4. Implement one-on-one time with the teacher. Giving children a few moments of private time each day will help students feel cared about and soothed, experts say.

5. Create “safe” corners in the classroom. Children should have space if they need to take a break and regroup. This respite is particularly important if children are suffering from trauma or toxic stress.

6. Be predictable. As the Houston-based psychiatrist and trauma expert Bruce Perry writes, “If a schedule is consistent, but the teacher is not, there is no predictability for the child.” Your smile and the calm rhythm of your voice can make a child feel safe, he explains.

7. Make sure your students are eating nutritious food and have time to move and play at school. Study after study shows that healthy students perform better on tests, attend school more often, and behave better in class. With this in mind, schools should ensure that students have nutritious meals and snacks (including during celebrations, where it can be easy to default to less-nutritious foods like birthday cake) as well as regular opportunities to be physically active.

8. Hang up reminders to use “talk moves” for classroom discussions. Taping helpful conversational formulas to the wall for kids to refer to—“What do you think?” or “I heard you say X—could you explain that?”—can help children get into a classroom discussion and feel more connected socially. This is especially helpful in getting shy students to join the conversation.

9. Boost engagement with phrases like “I wonder” and “I notice.” Encouraging students to use these phrases in conversation can clue in teachers about what and how children are learning. This can make it easier to pinpoint gaps and reach out to students who need help, which may reduce their anxiety about learning.

10. Teach and model social-emotional learning. Showing kids how to calm themselves, work out conflicts, and name emotions helps everyone in the classroom better focus on learning and promotes academic and social development.

While sleep, exercise, nutrition, and mindfulness are critical to help children heal the impact of toxic stress, research suggests it is the cumulative dose of positive student and teacher interactions that makes the biggest difference.

Of course, these suggestions are just one piece of a bigger puzzle for mitigating the impact of toxic stress. Children who experience more severe or frequent ACEs, such as abuse or household instability, will

likely need more interventions beyond those that even a caring, nurturing teacher can provide, and referrals to counseling and community resources are likely the next step. But using the above strategies can do wonders for easing toxic stress in the classroom.

What's especially gratifying is that most of these science-based teaching practices are simple ones. They don't need expensive technology. They don't require specialists or extra rooms. And they can be easily incorporated into almost any school. Even a daily hug or high five from a caring teacher can help kids thrive.

Jim Hickman is the CEO of the Center for Youth Wellness in San Francisco, which seeks to raise awareness of the long-term consequences of childhood trauma and promotes trauma screening and treatment. Kathy Higgins is the CEO of the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, a national nonprofit that works to help kids develop lifelong healthy habits.

[This op-ed originally appeared in Education Week [here](#).]