



# Students with Trauma and Behavior Difficulties: Overview and Strategies



**Brownsville ISD Special  
Services Department**

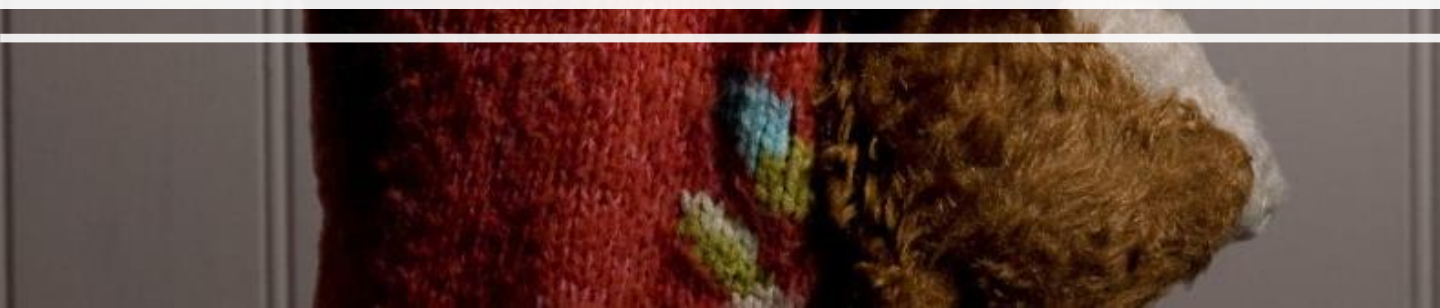


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- Research Based Strategies for Students with ACEs
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# Adverse Childhood Experiences





# Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

## ACEs

Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, is the term given to describe all types of abuse, neglect, and other traumatic events that individuals under the age of 18 endure during childhood.

Aspects of the environment that can undermine their sense of safety, stability, and bonding such as growing up in a household with substance abuse, mental health issues, or instability due to parental separation or incarceration of a parent, sibling, or other member of the household.

## Traumatic Events in Childhood

These events can be emotionally painful or distressing and can have effects that persist for years. Factors such as the nature, frequency, and seriousness of the traumatic event, prior history of trauma, and available family and community supports can shape a child's response to trauma.

## What is trauma?

Trauma is an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape, or natural disaster.

## Types of Trauma

- Bullying
- Emotional abuse
- Physical and/or sexual abuse
- Emotional and physical neglect
- School violence
- Transgenerational trauma
- System-induced trauma
- Traumatic grief and separation
- Victim of or witness to community violence
- Victim of or witness to domestic violence
- Deportation and separation of families

# Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

## Effects of Trauma

Reactions to trauma can occur immediately after the event or could be delayed until later in the future, and can vary greatly depending on the individual.

- Subtle symptoms – withdrawal, failure to understand instructions, misreading context, general confusion, etc.
- Gradual development of destructive behaviors – both external and internal
- Immediate development of destructive behaviors – both external and internal

## Reactions to Trauma:

### Emotional, Behavioral, Physical, and Cognitive

#### Emotional

##### Immediate Reaction

- Anger
- Anxiety
- Sadness
- Disorientation
- Denial
- Guilt

##### Delayed Reaction

- Depression
- Grief reactions
- Shame
- Feeling vulnerable
- Emotional detachment

#### Behavioral

##### Immediate Reaction

- Nausea
- Sweating
- Fainting
- Muscle tremors
- Elevated heartbeat
- Extreme fatigue or exhaustion
- Highly sensitive startle response

##### Delayed reaction

- Appetite and digestive changes
- Sleep disturbances and nightmares
- Elevated cortisol levels
- Hyper arousal
- Long-term health effects

# Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

## Physical

### Immediate Reaction

- Nausea
- Sweating
- Fainting
- Muscle tremors
- Elevated heartbeat
- Extreme fatigue and exhaustion
- Highly sensitive startle response
- Depersonalization

### Delayed Reaction

- Appetite and digestive changes
- Sleep disturbances and nightmares
- Elevated cortisol levels
- Hyper arousal
- Long-term health effects (i.e., heart, liver, autoimmune, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease)

## Cognitive

### Immediate Reaction

- Difficulty concentrating
- Repeatedly replaying traumatic event
- Distortion of time and space
- Memory problems
- Strong identification with victims/targets

### Delayed reaction

- Flashbacks and reactivation of previous traumatic events
- Preoccupation with the event
- Difficulty making decisions
- Self-blame
- Generalization of triggers
- Suicidal thinking

## Trauma Shapes Future Beliefs

- Loss of hope
- Restricted expectations about life achievements
- Fear about premature death
- Anticipation that normal life events will not occur (i.e., education, ability to have and maintain a committed relationship, work opportunities, etc.)



# Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

## Triggers

Triggers can be set off by:

- Specific noise
- Distinct smell
- Particular scene (car accident)
- Physical sensation
- Loud noises
- Time of day
- Date
- Season
- Anniversary of event



## Paradigm Shift

Move from saying, “what’s wrong with you” to “what’s happened to you.”





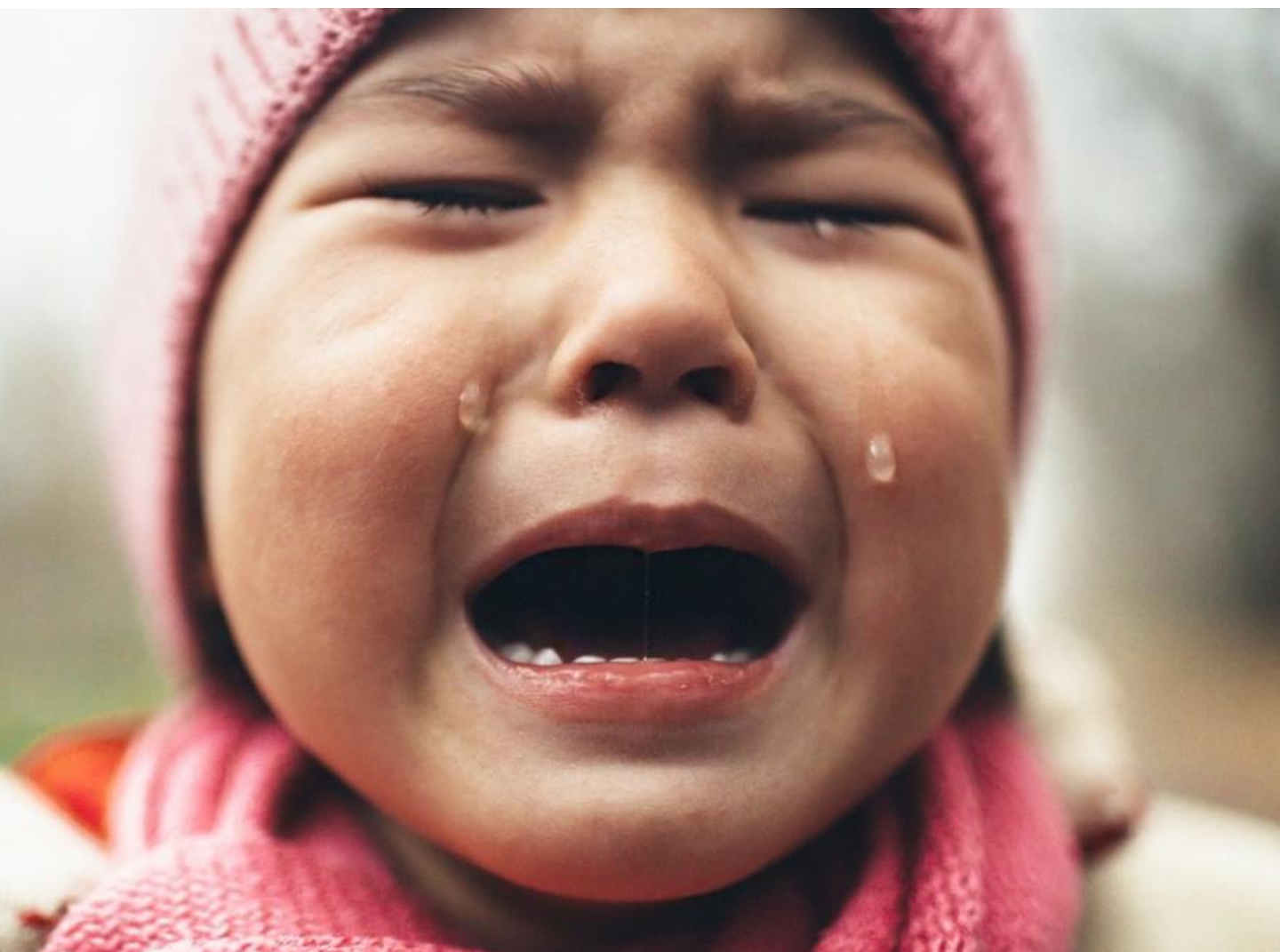
## Many Years...

There is nothing new about the presence of traumatized students in our schools. Often without realizing it, teachers have been dealing with trauma's impact for generations.



“One in every four students currently sitting in American classrooms have experienced a traumatic event, and the number is even greater for those living in impoverished communities,” and, **“young children exposed to more than five adverse experiences in the first three years of life face a 75 percent likelihood of having one or more delays in language, emotional, or brain development.”**


-- Neena McConnico, Director of Boston Medical Center's Child Witness to Violence Project





Childhood trauma from exposure to family violence can diminish concentration, memory, and the organizational and language abilities that children need to function well in school.





Children who have experienced trauma may have difficulties in school such as:

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Failing to understand directions

Overreacting to comments from teachers and peers

Misreading context

Failing to connect cause and effect

Other forms of communication





# PTSD

Children who witness violence often have trouble in the classroom because their post-traumatic stress can manifest itself as inattention, sleep dysfunction, distractibility, hyperactivity, depression, aggression, and angry outbursts.

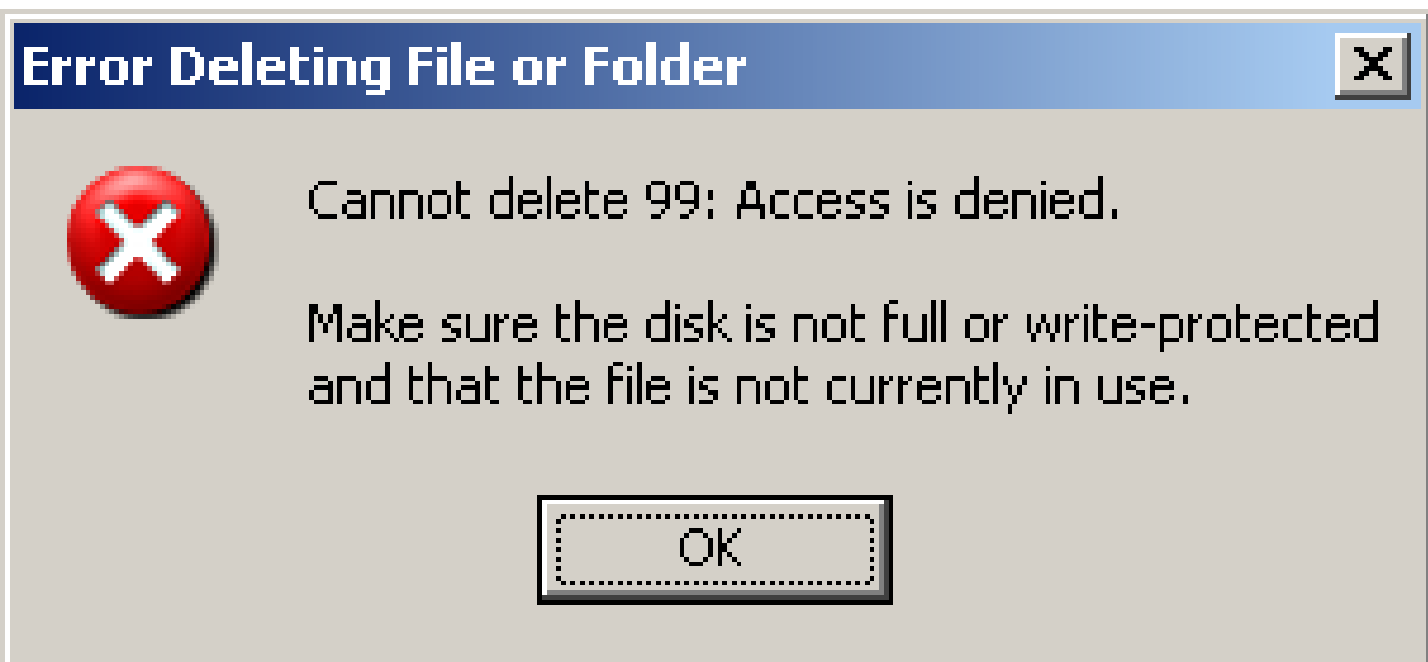


In some cases, “these students may withdraw and appear to be unfazed by their trauma and thus blend in and their trauma can go unnoticed. These children are the children I worry about the most, the ones who sneak under the radar and don’t get the help they need.”

--Neena McConnico

KEEP OUT! CAUTION! KEEP OUT! CAUTION

# Unable to Delete



When the brain has experienced significant adversity, it becomes fundamentally reorganized. Past experiences can live on in the body and may be experienced again as flashbacks, memories, or repetitive thoughts about the painful event.

KEEP OUT! CAUTION! KEEP OUT! CAUTION





# Am I Safe?

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A traumatized brain can be tired, hungry, worried, rejected, or detached, and these states are often accompanied by feelings of isolation, worry, angst, and fear. Chronic activation of the fear response can damage those parts of the brain responsible for cognition and learning.



## Can I trust you?

Many children and adolescents come to school with a deep mistrust of adults because they have never formed healthy attachments. These young people have brains in a constant state of alarm.



# A Silent Epidemic

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Childhood adversity is invisible — it usually takes place behind closed doors or within the impenetrable family bubble. But skyrocketing chronic health problems, prison populations, mental illness, high school discipline and dropout rates show clearly that most humans are suffering the short and long-term effects of toxic stress.





## Not Just “THEM”

Even those without ACEs are affected by health costs, prison costs, workplace costs and increasing poverty. This is an epidemic. A sickness that affects us all. The good news is that we can do something about it.



# Discipline

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Students who seemingly deserve the most punitive consequences we can deliver are often the ones who most need a positive and personal connection with the teacher.

In many cases, when they act out they are letting us know that they are seeking a positive connection with an adult authority figure and that they need that connection first, before they can or will focus on academic content.





# 25%

For the 25 percent of American children who experience trauma at home, school may be their only harbor from that tempest, and teachers represent so much more than purveyors of facts and figures.

To these kids, teachers offer reassurance that not all adults are harmful, that even if they are not made to feel worthy at home, there are people in the world who will value, support, and love them.







Researchers recommend processing experiences through as many modalities as possible:

- Visual images
- Thoughts
- Movement
- Emotions
- Sensations

Students in therapeutic treatment are taught to use:

- Relaxation methods
- Meditation and comforting routines
- Artistic and/or written expression



A blurred background image showing a business meeting. Several people are seated around a table, looking at documents. One person's hand is visible, holding a pen over a document. The text "Research Based Strategies" is overlaid in white.

# Research Based Strategies



# No “Quick” Solution

It takes repeated efforts to rewire the brain to experience and manage feelings more consciously so that the thinking part of the brain can come into play.





## Take the time!

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The most effective classroom management comes in the form of strategies that prevent acting out before it occurs. And those strategies arise primarily from developing positive relationships and assuming the best about our students' intentions.



**Positive  
Intent:  
Assume  
the best  
about  
me!**

Assume that our students want to be here, want to participate, and, specifically, want to learn good behavior. When we internalize and act from this assumption, our students behave better and learn more, and it changes our interactions with them.





# Positive Intent

The Key Phrase for the skill of Positive Intent is:

“You wanted (state the desire) so you (hurtful action).”

“You may not (hurtful action), (hurtful action) hurts.”

“When you want (state the desire), say (teach a new skill).”





# Craving Safety

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Traumatized people need to find a sense of safety within their own bodies. Younger children need our help to do that—to process that lump in their throat, that rapid heartbeat, or that sensation around their eyes when they are about to cry.



## A Safe Space

The best approach, according to research, is to acknowledge the body's natural negative reactions by giving these students a safe place for a few minutes, allowing the brain and body an opportunity to calm down.



A young man with dark hair, wearing a purple shirt, is looking towards a man on the right. The man on the right is smiling and wearing a patterned shirt over a dark blue sweater. They are standing in a school hallway with rows of white lockers in the background. The lockers have silver handles and are numbered. The lighting is warm and yellowish.

# Scheduled Attention: Two by Ten

- Two minutes a day, ten days in a row
- Discuss anything the student wants to talk about (as long as the conversation is appropriate for school)
- Researchers found an 85% improvement in that one student's behavior
- In addition, the behavior of all the other students in class improved





## Creating a Chill- Out Plan

Sit with student and identify things that stress or frustrate him or her

Identify how he or she normally reacts and the consequences

Physiologically speaking, ask what frustration feels like

Identify better ways to respond to stress or frustration



# Soft, Yet Firm!

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The bottom line is that when students test us, they want us to pass the test. They are on our side rooting for us to come through with safety and structure, so that they can learn the behavior they need to learn to be happy and successful.



# Use Volume, Tone, and Posture

Face the student squarely using a softened voice and lowered tone.

Assume “positive intent” and assume the student wants to look good in front of his/her friends, do not publicly humiliate him/her.

This shift in volume, tone, and posture will firmly but softly communicate what is expected, deescalating possible tension.







# Provide Time for Cooperation

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- Provide the student with one or two step directions
- Walk away, allowing time for cooperation
- When student complies, reinforce it
- If student does not comply, have a plan for that
- Follow through with plan

# Break Things Down Into Steps

Just as students often need complex math problems broken down into small, digestible lessons, so they need small, manageable steps when it comes to learning behavior and classroom procedures.

## ...And Walk Them Through It (Modeling)

Once we decide to put our energy into breaking down the behaviors we want to see into simple steps, we need to show kids what the behavior looks like. Make sure to model and demonstrate each step along the way to ensure clarity and understanding, just as you would with any complex task in reading, math, or science.





# Best Behavior

# BINGO

## Use Behavior Rubrics

Rubrics work great for content– and equally great for procedures and classroom behaviors such as lining up, appropriate voice volumes, settling down to learn, and getting ready for dismissal.

# Use Visuals to Clarify

Classroom Norms

What students are  
supposed to do

How students  
complete work or play  
activities and lets them  
know when they are  
finished

How students move  
from one activity to  
another

How students make  
choices about what  
they want to do

## Behavior Visuals 4



## Behavioral Reminders of Behavior Expectations!






## Empathetic Listening

A true listener tries to understand a speaker's message before formulating a response. When we allow students to speak uninterrupted and unhurried, we help them learn because speaking is an important means of consolidating knowledge.





# Power of Positive Language

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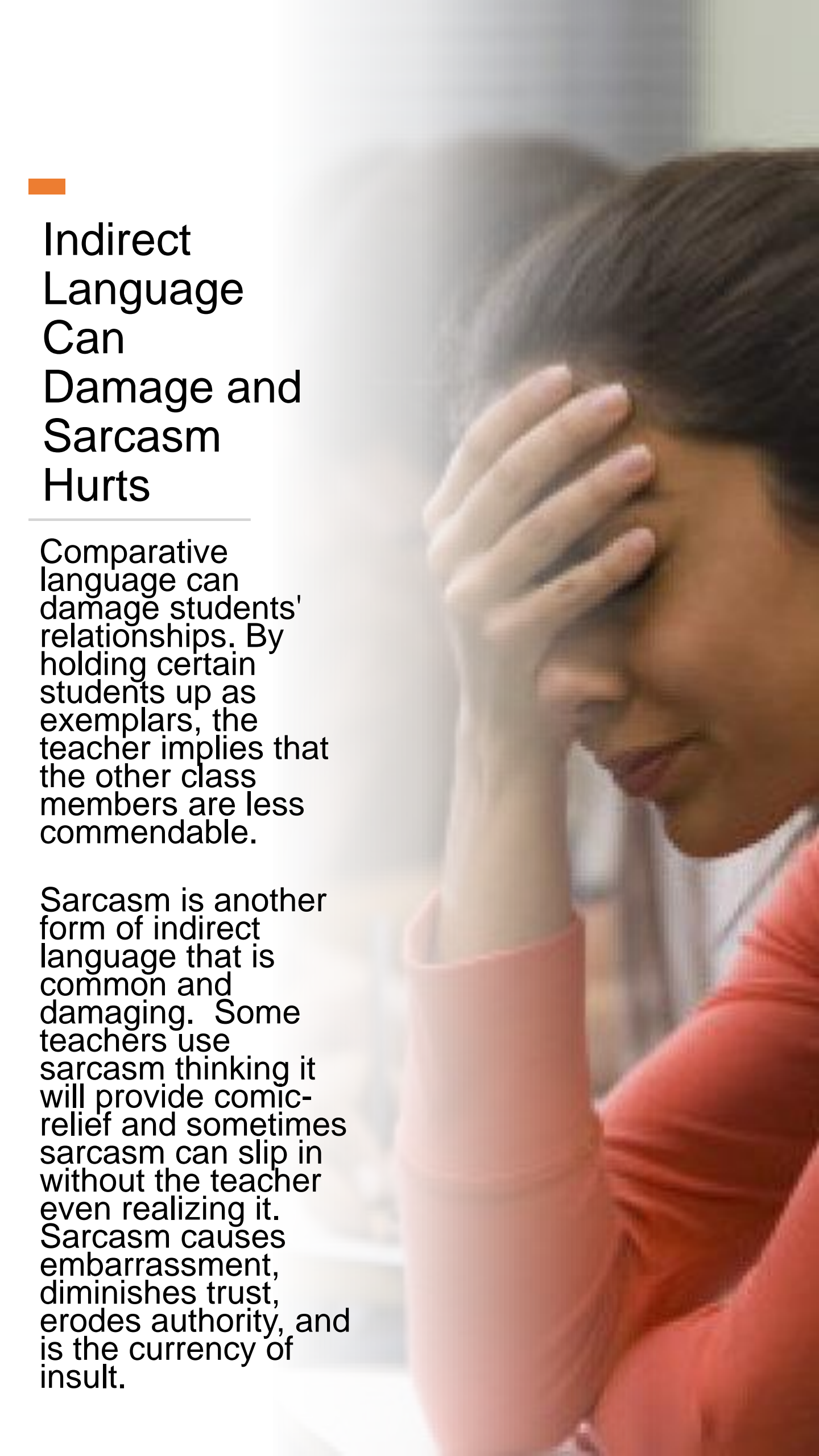
Because students with a history of trauma may not have experienced many positive relationships with adults, the student-teacher bond can be the most important gift educators have to offer. Teachers who are reliable, honest, and dependable can offer the stability these students so desperately need.





# How to Use Positive Language: First, Be Direct

When we say what we mean and use a kind, straightforward tone, students learn that they can trust us. They feel respected and safe, a necessary condition for developing self-discipline and taking the risks required for learning.

A woman with dark hair, wearing a red long-sleeved shirt, is shown in profile, covering her face with her right hand. She appears to be in a state of distress, embarrassment, or frustration. The background is blurred, suggesting an indoor setting like a classroom or office.

## Indirect Language Can Damage and Sarcasm Hurts

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Comparative language can damage students' relationships. By holding certain students up as exemplars, the teacher implies that the other class members are less commendable.

Sarcasm is another form of indirect language that is common and damaging. Some teachers use sarcasm thinking it will provide comic-relief and sometimes sarcasm can slip in without the teacher even realizing it. Sarcasm causes embarrassment, diminishes trust, erodes authority, and is the currency of insult.



## Second, Convey Faith In Students' Abilities and Intentions

When words and tone convey faith in students' desire and ability to do well, students are more likely to live up to the teacher's expectations of them.

Use specific praise:  
"You're trying lots of different ideas for solving that problem. That takes persistence."

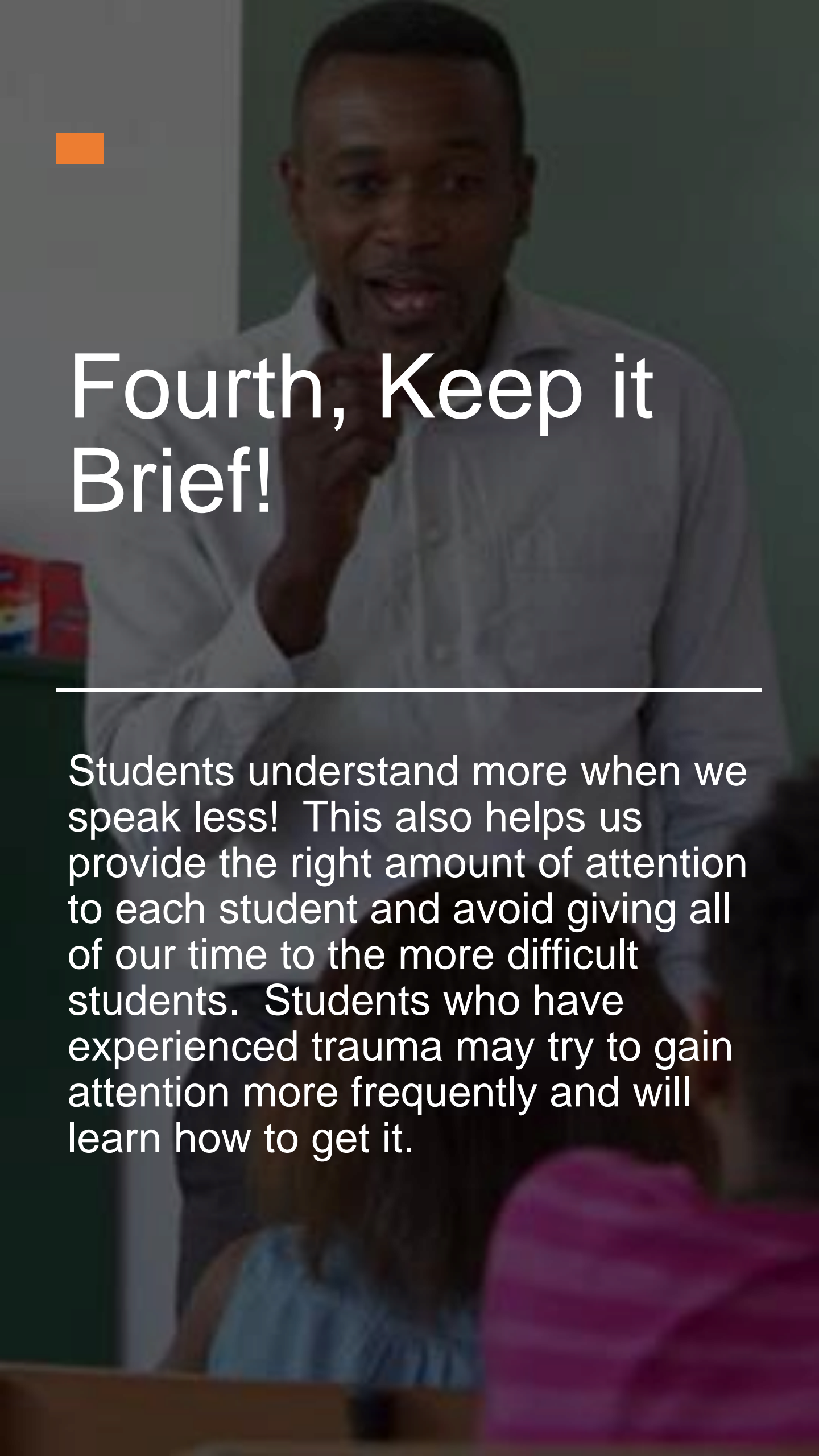
Such observations give students hard evidence for why they should believe in themselves.





## Third, Focus on Actions, Not Abstractions

There is a place, of course, for such abstract terms as respectful and responsible, but we must give students plenty of opportunities to associate those words with concrete actions. Classroom expectations such as "treat one another with kindness" will be more meaningful to students if we help them picture and practice what those expectations look like in different situations.

A man in a light blue button-down shirt is standing in a classroom, gesturing with his right hand as he speaks. In the foreground, the backs of two students' heads are visible; one is wearing a blue shirt and the other a pink shirt. The background is slightly blurred, showing classroom shelves with various items.

# Fourth, Keep it Brief!

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Students understand more when we speak less! This also helps us provide the right amount of attention to each student and avoid giving all of our time to the more difficult students. Students who have experienced trauma may try to gain attention more frequently and will learn how to get it.





## Fifth, Know When to be Silent

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When  
teachers  
use silence,  
we open a  
space for  
students to  
think,  
rehearse  
what to say,  
and  
sometimes  
gather the  
courage to  
speak at all.



# Recovery Takes Time

Some children, if given support, will recover within a few weeks or months from the fear and anxiety caused by a traumatic experience.

Other children will need more help over a longer period of time in order to heal and may need continuing support from family, teachers, or mental health professionals. Anniversaries of the events or media reports may act as reminders to the child, causing a recurrence of symptoms, feelings, and behaviors.





How to Address Common Classroom Misbehavior



# Attention-Seeking

Attention-seeking behavior is a mild, recurring behavior that a student engages in as a way to obtain teacher or peer attention. Chronic blurting out, excessive helplessness, and tattling are examples that may be attention-seeking in nature. An effective strategy for attention-seeking behavior is planned ignoring. Planned ignoring can reduce or eliminate the attention the student is seeking when engaging in misbehavior but gives the student frequent attention when not engaging in misbehavior.

## **Teach students appropriate ways to get attention**

- Teach appropriate ways to get attention in all settings
- Role play to demonstrate both appropriate and inappropriate behaviors
- Immediately acknowledge or reward the attention-seeking student as soon as the student demonstrates appropriate behavior (always reward compliance)

## **Avoid rewarding the behavior by giving a negative response**

- Avoid providing negative feedback in front of others
- Find ways to provide positive interactions

## **Maintain frequent interactions with student when not misbehaving**

- Interact positively with the student when not misbehaving
- Provide 3 to 1 ratio of positive to corrective interactions with the student

## **Discuss a plan with the student**

- Meet with the student to discuss the behavior and how you plan to respond
- Implement a behavior contract with the student

## **Monitor the behavior to determine if progress is being made**

- Record data on frequency and duration of the behavior

# Disruptive Behaviors

Disruptive behaviors can be managed if proactive and response practices consistently implemented. Disruptive behaviors may involve more severe and longer-lasting behaviors. There are some disorders that can cause a student to behave angrily or aggressively toward others or property and the student may have difficulty controlling their emotions and behaviors. Sociological factors and stressors may also contribute to disruptive behavior in students who do not have a disability in addition to other factors.

## **Use nonverbal and paraverbal interactions to de-escalate**

- Use non-threatening body language, soft tone of voice
- Listen to the student and validate their feelings

## **Ask open-ended questions**

- Use neutral open-ended questions to gather more information
- To fully understand the situation, ask the student how you can help

## **Avoid power struggles**

- Avoid an emotional response
- Offer choices
- Provide an opportunity for the student to calm down
- Address the situation after the student has calmed down
- Refrain from blaming the student

# Elopement/Running

Students that elope (leave the classroom or designated area) are typically trying to avoid or access something, such as a liked or disliked activity. It is critical to choose interventions that are specific to the function of the behavior. Consider the reason the pattern of behavior is occurring. When addressing elopement behaviors, preventative and response strategies should be implemented in order to ensure safety of everyone involved.

## **Structure the environmental setting**

- Arrange the room to decrease the opportunity to run
- Seat student farthest from the door

## **Ensure supervision at all times**

- Minimize travel alone within the school
- Provide adult supervision and proximity control

## **Establish an alternative location**

- Provide the student with an alternative location within the class to work or take a break
- Make the area inviting to establish a sense of security

## **Eliminate or decrease opportunities for frustration**

- Provide as many academic and social successes as possible
- Ensure the student understands instructions and allow adequate time for work
- Incorporate interactive lessons to off-set excessive independent work
- Teach a replacement behavior to use when the student feels frustrated

## **Implement an individual reinforcement system**

- Implement a reinforcement system with a high rate of reinforcement associated with the replacement behavior

## **Provide praise**

- Praise the student as much as possible during instructional activities and when staying in assigned area



# Hyperactivity

Students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) often have difficulty focusing, easily distracted, disorganized, forget things, difficulty listening, fidgeting, impatient, interrupt, blurt out, misplace things, and impulsive. It is also possible for other students without ADHD to have similar types of behaviors in the classroom due to a variety of other factors.

## **Provide structure and predictable environment**

- Be consistent with routines and procedures
- Follow class schedule as much as possible
- Make the student aware of any changes in advance
- Structure and predictability lowers anxiety levels and may prevent overstimulation

## **Make instructions simple and clear**

- Ask students to repeat instructions if it is a new activity
- Remind the student of behavior expectations prior to each activity
- Explain when and how movement is appropriate for each activity

## **Use visual reminders of desired behaviors**

- Use cue cards, hand signals, or other attention signals to help students get back on track
- Make sure to teach the meaning of these cues and review them regularly
- Establish a nonverbal cue between yourself and the student to redirect student without interrupting classroom

# Inattentive

Some causes of student inattention include boredom, over-stimulation, poor self-efficacy, lack of motivation, and physical or environmental causes. Inattentive behavior in the classroom can disrupt the learning process. Student inattention may be marked by the need for frequent redirection. The student may be easily distracted, have difficulty staying on task, be unable to follow directions and/or unable to complete assignments on time, ask a lot of questions, and appear confused.

## **Capture student's attention before giving instructions**

- Gain eye contact or seek a verbal response before beginning
- Present the task in an engaging and interesting manner

## **Give clear directions**

- Provide directions in chunks
- Ensure the student understands the directions

## **Use proximity control**

- Circulate throughout instruction in order to support the student's needs
- Use proximity to the student as a reminder to stay on task

## **Reduce the length of assignments**

- Provide the student with shorter tasks that do not require extended attention to be successful
- Gradually increase work size as student is successful

## **Provide opportunities for success**

- Give opportunities for choice
- Incorporate hands-on activities and movement
- Provide attention breaks
- Select activities that require active participation
- Preferential seating away from distractors

# Motivation

Motivated students are often more excited to learn and participate. Some students are self-motivated, with a natural love of learning, but even with the students who do not have this natural drive, a great teacher can make learning fun and inspire them to reach their full potential.

## Motivation Equation:

**Expectancy for success** X **Value of task** = **Motivation**

**Motivation** for an activity is determined by the student's **expectation** to succeed, multiplied by the student's **value** for the task.

## Increasing the student's *expectancy* for success:

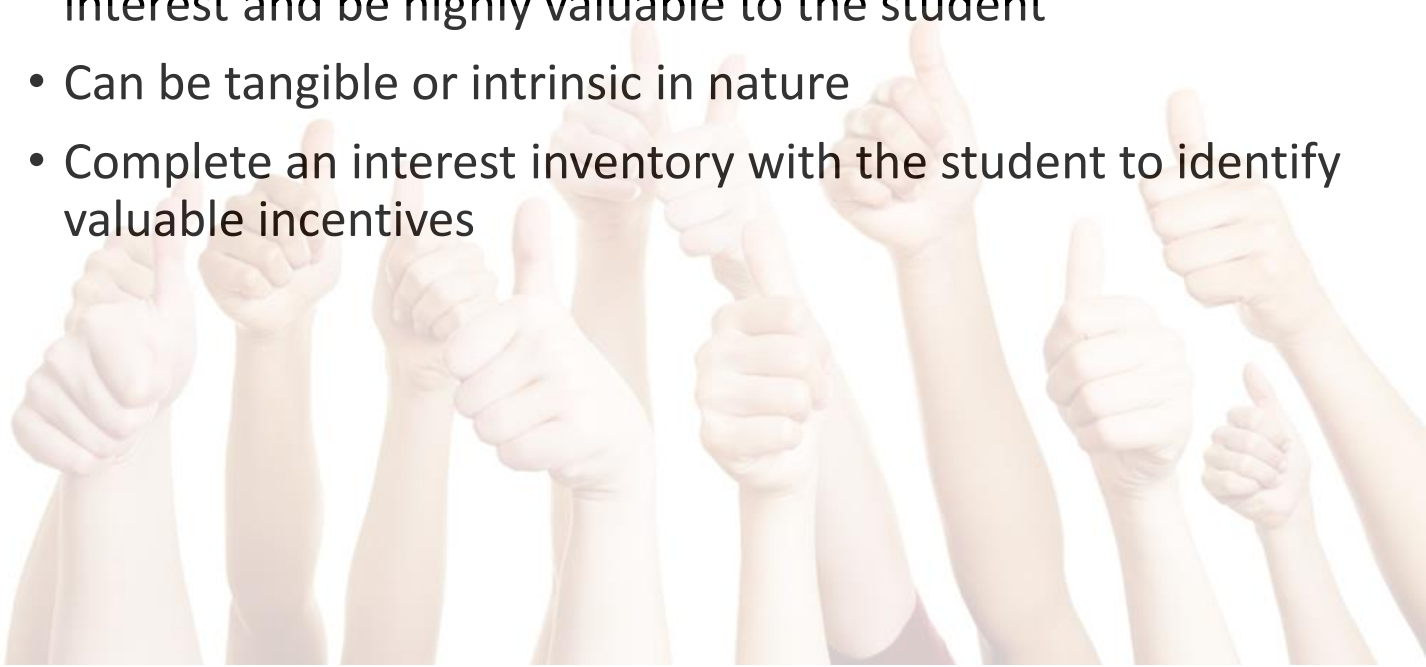
- Consider whether the task is difficult for the student
- Consider if the student expects to be successful
- Break down the task into small manageable pieces

## Increasing the *value* of the activity:

- Make the activity relevant or meaningful to the student
- Use a timer so the student can anticipate the end of the task
- Allow for scheduled breaks agreed upon by both parties

## Incentives

- In order for an incentive to work, it must have a personal interest and be highly valuable to the student
- Can be tangible or intrinsic in nature
- Complete an interest inventory with the student to identify valuable incentives





# Physical Aggression

Physical aggression is behavior threatening or causing physical harm towards others or property. A student's frustration can trigger aggressive behavior towards others or self. It is important to know the student's triggers in order to implement proactive and preventative strategies to reduce the risk of harm for the student and others.

## **Create a safe environment**

- Reduce clutter and remove unnecessary objects
- Be aware of antecedents/triggers so interventions can be implemented

## **Reduce access to possible targets**

- Use thoughtful group placement
- Structure transition times
- Remove other students from the immediate area
- Move away from the student
- Use a supportive stance

## **Provide constant supervision**

- Keep student in sight at all times
- Implement a crisis plan

## **Respect personal space**

- When possible, remain at least one arm's length away from student
- Avoid fully facing the student (supportive stance)

## **Avoid power struggles**

- Avoid an emotional response
- Provide an opportunity for the student to fully calm down in a designated safe space/area
- Address the situation after the student has fully calmed down

# Profanity/Inappropriate Language

Students use inappropriate language for a variety of reasons. Some use it to gain attention from peers or adults and others use it to express strong emotions (i.e., anger, distress, frustration, etc.). Identifying the underlying reason for a student's use of inappropriate language can allow you to respond more effectively.

## **Teach appropriate language**

- Define and teach appropriate language for school
- Teach replacement language
- Discuss examples of appropriate and inappropriate language and where different types of language can be used (i.e., school vs home vs social situations)

## **Student specific strategies**

- Respond to inappropriate language with simple, calm, one-word reminders
- Meet with the student individually to discuss self-regulation strategies
- Agree on signals for non-threatening and discreet reminders
- When the student uses appropriate language, reward immediately with positive attention and praise
- Identify antecedents that elicit undesired language; attempt to eliminate the stimuli causing the inappropriate language

## **Encouragement system**

- Recognize the use of appropriate language
- Some students may require a reinforcement system, find student interests and complete a student interest inventory

# Verbal Aggression

Students may become verbally aggressive when they encounter frustrating situations which they believe are beyond their control. Students may displace anger and frustration from those situations onto the nearest target.

## **Use nonverbal and paraverbal behaviors to de-escalate**

- Use non-threatening body language, soft tone of voice
- Listen to the student and validate their feelings
- Ignore minor verbal aggression if the student is seeking to gain attention
- Redirect the student and set limits

## **Respect personal space**

- When possible, remain at least one arm's length away from the student
- Avoid fully facing the student (supportive stance)

## **Avoid power struggles**

- Avoid an emotional response
- Provide an opportunity for the student to fully calm down in a designated safe space/area
- Address the situation after the student has calmed down

## **Isolate the situation if possible**

- Remove the audience or the student from the situation if possible

## **Set limits**

- Be consistent
- Limits should be simple/clear, reasonable, and enforceable
- Offer positive choices and consequences for those choices





# Virtual Instruction

# Using Video in Virtual Class Meetings

## Do NOT:

- Use video on and eye contact as part of their grade
- Remove them from video if their camera is off
- Give extra credit to student's who have their video on

## Do:

- Offer a choice to turn their video on
- Allow them to use appropriate background filters
- Have real time check-ins such as a typed message, thumbs up, smile, or verbal message

## WHY?

**Privacy:** students may not be comfortable with their peers seeing their homes, or they may be camera shy

**Safety:** students may fear other students taking screen shots and using it for cyberbullying purposes

**Equity:** some students may not have reliable internet services



# Virtual Classroom Management

1. **Entering the Class Meeting:** Establish routine. How do you want them entering into your meeting?
2. **Home Distractions:** Discuss attentiveness and what is allowed on screen. What can you truly enforce and hold students accountable for?
3. **Getting Your Attention:** Explain how. Visual cue? Direct Message? Verbally?
4. **Leaving during the Session/Lesson:** Set expectation. Signal to leave? Randomly leaving at any time? Scheduled break?
5. **Consistency:** Just like a school classroom, being consistent with teaching and enforcing rules is key. Contact parents as needed for support.
6. **Create a plan:** Find out about what signs each student shows when something is wrong
  - [My Virtual ER Plan](#)
7. **Virtual Accommodations:** Ensure accommodations are being followed in ALL classes
  - [Region 10 Accommodations](#)
  - [Region 1 ESC Accommodations](#)



Online  
Classroom Rules



# Ideas for Virtual Incentives and Rewards

- Praise
- Earn points
- 1 Second Party
- Friday Reward
- Raffle
- Verbal praise x 3
- Model it—choose a student to appreciate and have the student lead an activity
- Lunch online with students that have earned it
- Send lunch to a top student
- Deliver a prize from your store to a student(s)
- Silly teacher (TikTok dance, change hair color, etc.)
- <https://www.pbisrewards.com/blog/pbis-incentives-distance-learning/>
- Be creative!



# You Got This!

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There is no “one size fits all” solution for working with students who have experienced trauma or have been diagnosed with a behavioral disorder. We hope the information and strategies contained within this document have given you the knowledge and confidence you need!

The BISD Special Services Department is committed to providing the support needed to help ensure the success of every teacher and student.

Please reach out to our department if you need any support at (956) 548 – 8400.

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