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MENTAL HEALTH**Supporting Students With Chronic Trauma**

De-escalation strategies can help prevent students' emotional outbursts, and aid them and their peers in finding calm after one.

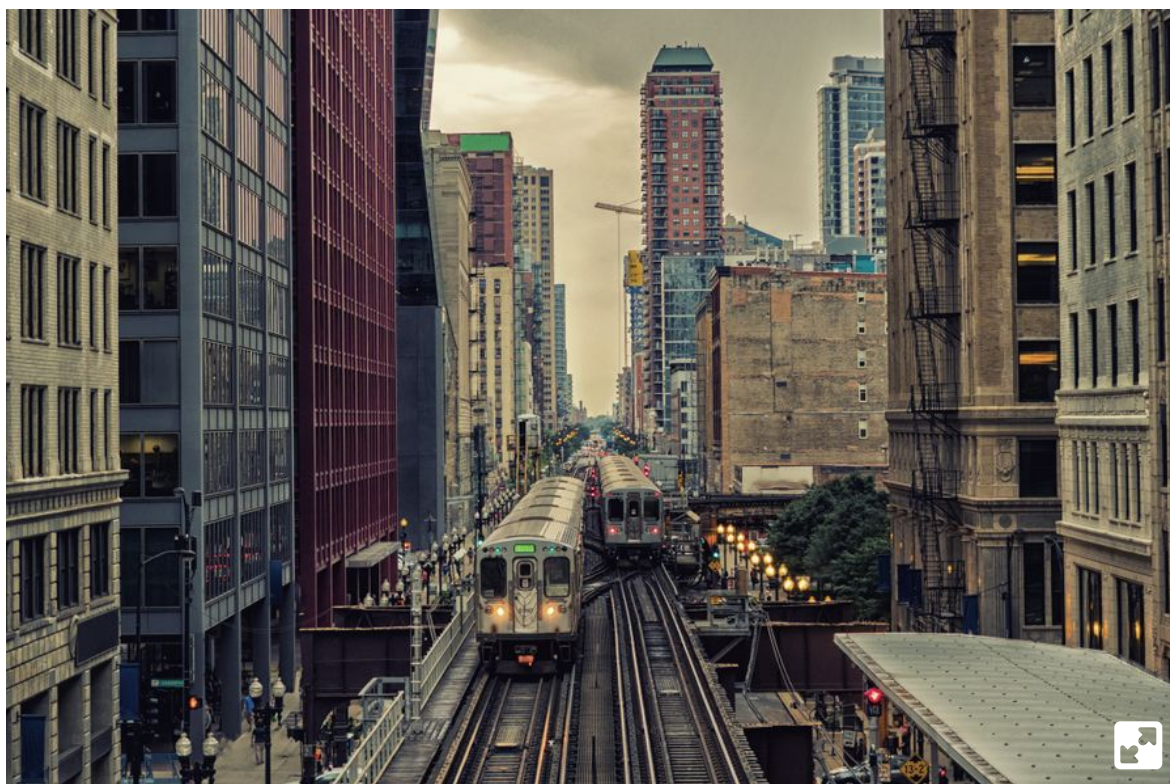
By *Micere Keels*

March 23, 2018

Three years ago, 9-year-old Tyshawn Lee was murdered in the Auburn Gresham neighborhood here in Chicago. He was playing in a park when a gunman lured him into a nearby alley and shot him because of his father's alleged gang ties. In response, Chicago Public Schools provided two weeks of mental health supports at the elementary school Tyshawn attended. They hoped it would be enough help to get the school back to normal.

But what does *normal* mean when you grow up in a constant state of fear?

Auburn Gresham, located on Chicago's Southside, had experienced 838 violent crimes in the 365 days before Tyshawn's murder. Violence is a part of everyday life for children like him. Already in 2018, there have been more than 430 shootings and 95 homicides in Chicago, and we are less than three months into the year. Is two weeks of support enough to help Chicago's youth cope with the trauma of these experiences?



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The Chicago L, the city's rail line, passes through downtown. Community violence in Chicago inspired the TREP Project, a trauma training program for teachers and schools.

As a researcher and professor at the University of Chicago, I have researched children's exposure to violence in urban areas for more than two decades and know the impact it can have on youth. Kids who experience **adverse childhood experiences** (<http://www.philadelphiaaces.org/philadelphia-ace-survey>) like violence and chronic housing instability can be either hyperactive—unable to contain the anxious energy—or hypoactive—unable to muster the energy to engage. Trauma impacts a **child's brain and**

cognitive processes ([blog/brains-in-pain-cannot-learn-lori-desautels](#)), making critical thinking and problem solving more difficult and emotional outbursts more likely.

After hearing about the district's short-term response and knowing just how much this contradicts what the research says, I realized I needed to help schools be better prepared to provide long-term support for students who experience chronic trauma.

I started by interviewing educators serving schools in high-crime neighborhoods in the city. I learned that they had limited access to mental health supports for students until students' behavior reached a level that received severe disciplinary action or a special education designation. One of their top requests for professional development was training on how to handle these situations better. Called de-escalation, this approach focuses on helping students who are getting increasingly agitated to calm down before their behavior gets out of hand.

PREVENTATIVE DE-ESCALATION

From my outreach, I created the ***Trauma Responsive Educational Practices (TREP)***

(<http://www.trepeducator.org/>) Project, which helps educators and schools serving children in neighborhoods that have high levels of toxic stress—such as poverty and violence—learn strategies to better support their students. But educators don't have to partner with TREP to learn some of these approaches. At some point in your teaching career, you're likely to witness emotional outbursts from your students.

Research (https://www.ncjfcj.org/sites/default/files/NCJFCJ_SJP_Trauma_Informed_Classrooms_Final.pdf) shows that students with trauma don't respond to punitive discipline, so it's important to know strategies that do work.

Preventative de-escalation strategies—based on the ***Acting Out Cycle***

(https://iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/module/bi1/cresource/q2/p02/bi1_02_trans_b/)—can help. Based on the work of **Geoff Colvin** (<https://www.irised.com/collections/geoff-colvin>) and many other researchers, the Acting Out Cycle provides a framework for understanding and responding to challenging student behaviors through different phases: calm, trigger, agitation, acceleration, peak acting out, de-escalation, and recovery.

Students often display several signs of agitation in the early stages of the Acting Out Cycle before a major emotional outburst occurs, such as balling up their fists, withdrawing from classroom interaction,

or clenching their jaw. Many educators tend to ignore students' increasing signs of agitation, hoping they'll eventually calm down. But when disregarded, these minor behaviors can quickly escalate.



Children that have experienced abuse are much more likely to interpret ambiguous touches—like an accidental hallway bump—as threatening.

Observing what triggers your students' outbursts will help you become better at using preventative de-escalation strategies to stop them before they start. Loud noises, touch, body language, and anniversaries of tragic events can all be triggers. Children that have experienced abuse, for example, are much more likely to interpret ambiguous touches—like an accidental hallway bump—as threatening. While it's impossible to identify and prevent all triggers, planning ahead is a critical component of preventative de-escalation.

Start by taking stock of how your classroom and class schedule are organized. Are the desks arranged such that students can easily move up and down the aisles with minimal chance of bumping? Are students swiftly and predictably transitioned into class and engaged with a ***bell-ringer activity*** ([/blog/new-way-deliver-bell-work-lori-desautels](https://www.edutopia.org/blog/new-way-deliver-bell-work-lori-desautels)) to minimize potential teasing at the start of class?

It's also important to debrief with students after an emotional outburst to help them identify their triggers in productive ways.

IN-THE-MOMENT DE-ESCALATION STRATEGIES

But as teachers, you can't prevent every outburst from happening.

Because it's difficult for anyone to think clearly and engage in rational conversations when in a heightened emotional state, your two objectives in these situations are to keep students safe and to help the agitated student calm down—not to get that student to apologize or discuss consequences.

Instead, keep your instructions short, clear, and concise, and repeat if necessary. When in an agitated state, traumatized students have a hard time processing complex instructions.

It's also important to affirm your students' autonomy by giving them choices. When your students feel respected, their sense of belonging and mood will often improve. You could say, "I see that you're upset, but it's not OK to yell at me. You can either go get a drink of water and come back in five minutes or sit in the reading chair and I will check in with you in five minutes." Be sure to avoid ultimatums like, "You better sit back down or I'll send you to the office," but do set limits to let students know what's required of them to move the conversation forward.



When in an agitated state, traumatized students have a hard time processing complex instructions.

It's also important to recap what your student says throughout the conversation. After summarizing what they say, ask if they agree with how you interpreted it. This ensures that you're both on the same page, and it also shows them that you're listening.

Before returning to learning, give your student more time to calm down on their own. A **de-escalation space** ([/video/creating-dedicated-space-reflection](#)) can do this—a quiet place in class where students can participate in de-stressing activities, like drawing or coloring.

MOVING PAST TRAUMA

In moments like these, it's also important not to forget the rest of your class. As soon as your agitated student is situated, make sure the rest of your students are calm and feel safe too. A **quick mindfulness activity** ([/article/mindfulness-high-school](#)) can do this. Afterward, acknowledge what happened and give your class a few minutes to process it to help students who may feel anxious.

When the class is brought back to calm, you can debrief with your student who acted out to help them identify what they're feeling.

It might be difficult for traumatized students to express their emotions, so you will need to guide them with questions like: "Were you feeling angry, sad, hurt, embarrassed, or something else?" or "Did something happen at home or during this class that upset you?" Building student agency is crucial. Ask

them to tell you in the future whenever they are feeling upset and need to take a brief break. This can help prevent outbursts.

Working with students who have experienced trauma can be incredibly taxing for teachers, especially when they don't have the tools to help the students who need it most. Here in Chicago, I've found that just because urban educators may know about the trauma their students experience, it doesn't mean that they know how it impacts them or how best to help them. Proactively preventing and responding to acting out behaviors with support rather than punishment can go a long way in creating schools that are safe for our students.

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MENTAL HEALTH

Setting Students With ADHD Up for Success

Students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder benefit from these easy-to-implement strategies—and so do their peers.

By *Nina Parrish*

April 27, 2018

Teachers often come to the classroom with an *unclear understanding*

(<https://www.additudemag.com/symptoms-of-add-hyperarousal-rejection-sensitivity/>) of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and they are rarely provided with strategies that detail how to work with students who have been diagnosed with ADHD, even though such students make up an increasingly large number of their students—11 percent and growing as of 2011, according to data gathered by the **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention** (<https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/adhd/data.html>).

As a special education teacher and tutor who coaches struggling students (many with ADHD), I have found several classroom strategies to be effective.

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MENTAL HEALTH

60-Second Strategy: Snowball Toss

A quick, fun classroom activity fosters open dialogue while releasing pent-up energy.

April 20, 2018

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TEACHER WELLNESS

With Student Trauma, It's OK to Set Boundaries

Student trauma impacts teachers, too. Taking care of yourself isn't a luxury—it's a necessity.

By *Emelina Minero*

May 1, 2018

It's probably not news to most teachers that nearly six out of 10 children have experienced trauma, according to a **foundational study** (https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/ace_graphics.html) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Kaiser. As educators on the frontlines, teachers

regularly encounter students who have experienced significant hardships in their homes and communities. But psychologists and mental health practitioners say that the impact of trauma goes beyond the kids and reaches into the lives of educators who work closely with them day to day.

This secondary form of trauma, known as vicarious trauma, **can develop**

(<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/information-service/research-briefing-vicarious-trauma-consequences-working-with-abuse.pdf>)

from a single event or over a period of time. To protect yourself from vicarious trauma, it's important to understand its impact, recognize its symptoms, and develop preventive strategies to take care of yourself. We recently spoke with Micere Keels, an associate professor at the University of Chicago and founder of the **TREP Project** (<http://www.trepeducator.org/>), a trauma-informed curriculum for urban teachers, on how to identify and navigate vicarious trauma.

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SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

Building a Positive Staff Culture Takes Work

If schools want a strong collegial atmosphere, they need to foster it intentionally—both across the school and on smaller scales.

By *Mary Davenport*

May 7, 2018

Some of the best professional advice I've heard and keep returning to is "Designate time to what you want." If teachers want a stronger classroom community, they need to use instructional time to build it. If leaders want more collaboration, they must allot time in the master schedule. The same idea holds if a school wants a strong adult culture.

And schools should want this. **Kent Peterson**

(https://www.nesacenter.org/uploaded/conferences/FLC/2014/handouts/Kent_Peterson/KP_JSD_Pos_Neg_Cult_copy.pdf), a professor who studies educational leadership, says that culture is always at play in a school's success

or failure, whether members of that culture realize it or not. Other research indicates that schools focused on building relational trust among staff are ***more successful at sustained implementation of best practices***

(<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/mar03/vol60/num06/Trust-in-Schools@-A-Core-Resource-for-School-Reform.aspx>)

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CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Why Students Cheat—and What to Do About It

A teacher seeks answers from researchers and psychologists.

By *Andrew Simmons*

April 27, 2018

“Why did you cheat in high school?” I posed the question to a dozen former students.

“I wanted good grades and I didn’t want to work,” said Sonya, who graduates from college in June. [The students’ names in this article have been changed to protect their privacy.]

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COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Improving Student-Led Discussions

A look at some common problems teachers find when implementing student-led discussions—and potential solutions.

By *Mark Wise*

April 24, 2018

In a Socratic seminar, Socratic circle, fishbowl, or Harkness discussion, the primary goal is for students to engage in and sustain an academic discussion independent of the teacher. The benefits of student-led discussions are well documented—students learn to purposefully reference the text as evidence as they develop opinions, and they learn to be more receptive to and respectful of the ideas of others.

Ultimately, student-led discussions require students to actively engage in collaborative and respectful dialogue while utilizing feedback from their peers to gain additional insight.

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LITERACY

Finding the Source of Reading Difficulties

Readers who are struggling in upper elementary and middle school may benefit from phonics instruction.

By *Anna Wright*

May 18, 2018

It's a common refrain heard in upper elementary and middle school teachers' lounges: "These kids can't read!"

But what do we really mean when we say a child can't read?

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5-MINUTE FILM FESTIVAL

5-Minute Film Festival: Resources for Teaching About Character

Five videos and a set of resources for celebrating Character Day on September 26.

By Amy Erin Borovoy

May 18, 2018

Schools and organizations around the world are hosting screenings of a collection of short videos that explore the research behind character development and encourage us to focus on our character strengths for greater personal and community well-being. You can see one example below, as well as videos that illustrate four of the **seven character strengths** (<http://www.kipp.org/our-approach/character>) distilled by KIPP schools in partnership with grit researcher Angela Duckworth and psychologists Martin Seligman and Christopher Peterson, authors of the book **Character Strengths and Virtues**

(<https://global.oup.com/academic/product/character-strengths-and-virtues-9780195167016?q=characterstrengths&lang=en&cc=us>)

. We hope you'll be inspired to celebrate **#CharacterDay2018** (<https://twitter.com/hashtag/characterday2018>) on September 26.

Last year, over 130,000 events were held in more than 150 countries to screen and discuss this and other videos produced by the organizers of Character Day. Fill out **this form**

(<https://form.jotform.us/72606880184158>) to register to host your own screening and join the global conversation on September 28 this year; find more resources on the **Character Day website**

(<http://www.letitriple.org/character-day/>). (*Best for: anyone curious about how to develop character strengths.*)

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FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

60-Second Strategy: Closing The Loop

A strategy for using a quick, whole-class reflection on content as a verbal exit ticket.

May 18, 2018

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TEACHING STRATEGIES

Recognizing and Alleviating Math Anxiety

Math anxiety affects almost half of elementary school students. Spot the symptoms and use these strategies to counteract it.

By *Gina Picha*

May 17, 2018

Math anxiety is much more than a dislike for the subject—it's a real problem for students, one that blocks the brain's working memory and starts a self-perpetuating cycle of math avoidance, low achievement, and fear. This form of anxiety manifests ***as early as kindergarten***

(<https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/07/03/36boaler.h31.html>), and ***nearly half of elementary school children*** (<https://hpl.uchicago.edu/sites/hpl.uchicago.edu/files/uploads/American%20Educator%2C%202014.pdf>) experience it.

Avoidance: Math anxiety and math avoidance go hand in hand. Do you have students who seem to grasp at any reason to leave the classroom during math instruction? This could be more than just a student trying to get out of work. Students with high levels of math anxiety ***tend to avoid mathematics*** (http://www.mccc.edu/~jennings/Courses/documents/math_anxiety.pdf) at all costs.

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