

Districts across the United States report that students continue to show effects of trauma and stress since returning to school after COVID-19 closures, which has resulted in increased behavioral challenges.¹ According to the Trauma Institute at the Center for the Treatment of Anxiety and Mood Disorders, trauma is “an adverse experience in life that affects us in very significant ways and that often challenges our sense of normalcy in our individual worlds, and/or the world in general.”² Trauma impacts students in various ways, including difficulty with managing emotions, expressing concerns, anxiety, contextualizing situations, and other effects.³ As such, this report aids teachers and leaders in exploring how to support students impacted by trauma through empathetic teaching and positive behavior management.

DEFINING EMPATHETIC TEACHING & POSITIVE BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT



***Teacher empathy** is the degree to which instructors work to deeply understand students’ personal and social situations, feel caring and concern in response to students’ positive and negative emotions, and communicate their understanding and caring to students through their behavior.”⁴*

Positive behavior management “strategies are evidence-based, proactive approaches to changing challenging student behavior. Some examples of positive behavior strategies are pre-correcting and prompting and nonverbal signals.”⁵



Empathetic teaching draws on three components:⁶

- Cognitive** One’s ability to understand another’s perspective and why they have certain feelings in personal and social circumstances
- Affective** One’s ability to feel what another is feeling, whether that be mirroring or uniquely reacting to another’s situation
- Behavioral** One’s ability to set boundaries when empathizing with students and maintain a focus on student learning

Positive behavior management enables teachers to:⁷

- ❖ Understand behavior as a way to determine student needs
- ❖ Build trust and relationships with students
- ❖ Learn to proactively address behavioral challenges rather than react to them
- ❖ Consider why students may behave a certain way (e.g., lack of communication skills, attention seeking, avoidance tactic)
- ❖ Build a safe and supportive classroom environment
- ❖ Engage students, including those with learning and attention issues

EXPERIENCING SECONDARY TRAUMATIC STRESS

Teachers with strong empathetic teaching skills can set boundaries to avoid feeling overwhelmed by students’ emotions and experiences.⁸ Without boundaries, teachers may face secondary traumatic stress. **Secondary traumatic stress**, or compassion fatigue, “is the emotional distress that arises when someone vicariously experiences the traumatic experiences of another individual.”⁹ Causes include hearing others’ traumatic experiences, observing high levels of distress after a traumatic event, seeing images connected to a traumatic event, or recounting a student’s experience.¹⁰

Warning signs of vicarious trauma include:¹¹

Hypervigilance	Poor boundaries	Avoidance
Inability to empathize/numbing	Feelings of professional inadequacy	Chronic exhaustion/physical ailments
Minimizing	Anger and cynicism	Addictions

Strategies to Support Teacher Well-Being¹²

- Increase awareness { • Learn more about the effects of trauma and secondary traumatic stress and how to identify and incorporate new ways of addressing specific challenges
- Assess current stress level { • Take inventory of your current stress level and consider using a guided tool (e.g., the [Compassion Fatigue Self Test](#))
- Maintain connections { • Connect with colleagues, family, and friends and express appreciation for others
- Practice self-care { • Engage in physical (e.g., sleeping), psychological (e.g., journaling), spiritual (e.g., being in nature), emotional (e.g., feeling proud), and professional (e.g., negotiating needs) self-care

*"With empathy, we are better able to discern when a student is lost and when another has just made a connection. We see when a class member is engaged or disengaged. We see where our students are and where they could be."*¹³

-Paula A. Franzese, *Seton Hall Law Review*

*"The goal in [positive behavior management strategies] is not to 'eliminate' behavior. Rather, it is to understand the behavior's purpose so that the student can replace it with new, prosocial behaviors that achieve the same purpose."*¹⁴

-Ruef, M.B. et al., *Intervention in School and Clinic*

APPLYING EMPATHETIC TEACHING & POSITIVE BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT

When working with students experiencing trauma and using a trauma-informed teaching practice (e.g., empathetic teaching, positive behavior management), teachers should be mindful of the school-based factors that may increase students' likelihood of recovering from trauma, including:¹⁵

A safe place to be	A warm, caring, supportive environment	High expectations for achievement	A significant adult committed to the student
Academic achievement	Models from peers of developmentally appropriate behavior	Good relationships with peers	Involvement and participation in school community/activities

The following table presents six topics, each with three associated strategies, that connect to empathetic teaching, positive behavior management, or both practices. Teachers can work on consistently incorporating one or multiple strategies into their classroom to support student behavior more effectively.

Personal context and cultural sensitivity¹⁶

- ❖ Consider non-pejorative explanations for student behavior to better understand actions and respond appropriately
- ❖ Learn about students' social and cultural contexts through volunteer work or professional development opportunities
- ❖ Use "I" statements to demonstrate an understanding of a student's perspective

Language¹⁷

- ❖ Express belief in all students to develop students' positive self-perceptions as capable and responsible individuals
- ❖ Integrate three or more positive statements for every one negative statement when communicating to the class
- ❖ Use clear and direct language with an appropriate tone, expression, and body language

Relationship building¹⁸

- ❖ Ask students questions about their feelings and emotions or whether a student needs something
- ❖ Make direct eye contact when speaking with students using "soft eyes"¹⁹
- ❖ Identify student interests and build these topics into lessons

Modeling behavior²⁰

- ❖ Demonstrate positive behavior when communicating with other teachers and staff members
- ❖ Continue to use positive behavior outside of the classroom (e.g., hallways, cafeteria)
- ❖ Group students demonstrating behavioral challenges with peers who can model positive behavior

Creating physically and socially safe spaces²¹

- ❖ Prevent sensory overload (e.g., lighting, organization) and maintain an appropriate volume during class activities
- ❖ Prepare students for transitions by announcing changes in activities and locations
- ❖ Recognize student voices by offering choices and making compromises

Norms and expectations²²

- ❖ Create positive, observable, and measurable class expectations with students that everyone understands
- ❖ Teach and reinforce expectations throughout the year and reflect on expectations when checking in with students
- ❖ Implement norms and expectations consistently to prevent feelings of favoritism and to convey fairness

The following discussion guide presents questions to explore during staff meetings, professional learning community (PLC) meetings, or other faculty settings in which staff members and leaders can reflect and engage in open conversations. Discussion moderators may choose how to organize these conversations (e.g., everyone shares in a designated order, think-pair-share activities). However, discussions should begin with participants agreeing to norms and expectations around confidentiality, participation, and other topics deemed necessary. Further, participants should not feel constrained by these questions, and participants and moderators may use discretion when delving into tangential conversations that may be pertinent to their school and experiences.

DISCUSSING EMPATHETIC TEACHING & POSITIVE BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT

In what ways do you currently implement trauma-informed practices? Do any current strategies reflect empathetic teaching or positive behavior management?

What are your/school's strengths regarding empathetic teaching? Regarding positive behavior management?

What are your/school's areas for improvement regarding empathetic teaching? Regarding positive behavior management?

To what extent do you set boundaries for yourself when connecting with students (e.g., referring students to counselors)?

In what ways do you adjust instruction and interactions given students' personal, social, and cultural contexts? What contexts would you like to learn more about to inform your teaching practices?

Do your students have an opportunity to contribute to classroom expectations and spaces? Do you plan to expand this involvement? Why or why not?

DISCUSSING EMPATHETIC TEACHING & POSITIVE BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT

What are two steps you plan on taking to develop your approach to empathetic teaching? To positive behavior management?

In what ways could your school support your ability to implement empathetic teaching and positive behavior management practices?

In what ways could your school support your well-being to prevent or reduce secondary traumatic stress?

ENDNOTES

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³ Rader, J. "Using Trauma Informed Strategies to De-Escalate Classroom Conflict." California School-Based Health Alliance. p. 8. <https://www.schoolhealthcenters.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Trauma-Informed-Strategies-to-Deescalate-Classroom-Conflict.pdf>

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¹⁴ Block quote reproduced verbatim, with a minor adjustment, from: Ruef, M.B. et al. "Positive Behavioral Support: Strategies for Teachers." *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 34:1, September 1998. p. 4.

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