

Addressing Student Trauma, Anxiety, and Depression

It really helps to understand where the children come from and understand post-traumatic stress disorder. Things that we might take for granted or might not notice could be very upsetting to a child, keeping them in that part of their brain where it's "fight or flight." So it's a reminder every now and then that we just need to check ourselves and think, what are some things that we can control that could be helpful to a child in distress?

– Susan Stanley, Principal of Salina Elementary School, Dearborn, Michigan

Key Takeaways

- Educators working with immigrant and refugee students should be aware of the ways in which anxiety, stress, fear, depression, and post-traumatic stress can affect their students.
- Building relationships with students and families can help identify students' needs, while providing professional development on a variety of topics in a respectful setting can help increase awareness across the staff.

See this information online

Addressing Student Trauma, Anxiety, and Depression

- View online: <http://www.colorincolorado.org/immigration/guide/trauma>
- Download PDF: <http://www.colorincolorado.org/immigration/guide/trauma-pdf>

Complete guide: <http://www.colorincolorado.org/immigration/guide>

Excerpted from *How to Support Immigrant Students and Families*.

Overview

Many immigrant students are currently living with high levels of fear, anxiety, stress, and depression. To better understand the reasons why, take a look at our section on [how immigration issues impact students](#).

To address these challenges, building relationships with students and families can help identify students' needs, while providing professional development on a variety of topics in a respectful setting can help increase awareness across the staff. Here is some information to help get started.

Social-emotional distress

In UCLA survey about how immigration enforcement is affecting schools, almost 90% of administrators surveyed "indicated that they have observed behavioral or emotional problems in immigrant students," and 25% indicated that it was a significant problem (Gándara & Ee, 2018b, p. 2). One administrator notes,

"Several students have arrived at school crying, withdrawn and refusing to eat lunch because they have witnessed deportation of a family member. Some students show anxiety symptoms...All of this impacts their ability to focus and complete work, which further affects them academically." (p.9)

Pediatricians serving immigrant families are noticing the same thing, according to a December 2017 [Kaiser Family Foundation report](#), as well as negative effects on health such as problems sleeping, headaches, stomachaches, and mental health issues.

Loss of motivation

In addition, students' loss of motivation is another challenge. In this [Education Week article](#), Principal Nedda de Castro of the International School at Prospect Heights in Brooklyn observed that, "Some of the students are assuming that they're just going to be deported anyway and starting to talk about how there's really no point in coming to school anymore. It's a lot of lost potential."

According to the UCLA research, administrators and educators across the country also reported that high-achieving students are giving up on their plans for college. After a nearby raid, a teacher in the Midwest observed the following:



“I noticed those students behaving so differently. They don't sit or stand tall. They do not want to participate in presentations. They do not want to be called. They seem disconnected or uninterested now... I serve in an academically advanced setting where students are selected and good performers” (p. 10).

Another teacher from Oregon observed,

“I have students who were college-bound now questioning if it's worth it, because they don't believe that they could get a job in their field after graduating” (p. 12).

And in our own travels to Dearborn, MI, we met teachers and community members who spoke about the toll of [lengthy separations](#) on students and families from countries such as Yemen and Syria.



Identify resources for addressing student anxiety and depression

Why this matters

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) [has publicly stated their expectation](#) that the current climate will likely increase students' toxic stress level, particularly if students experience trauma. Researchers at the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) documented the impact of this anxiety on children as young as three, including an increase in finger biting and toilet accidents (Cervantes, Ullrich, & Matthews, 2018, p. 9), while teachers of older students report an increase in severe depression and a decrease in motivation and engagement. See more on the impact of anxiety in early childhood in our section [on young children in immigrant families](#).

Tips for getting started

- Learn about anxiety's impacts on students in your age group, such as impacts on [behavior](#), as well as strategies for [supporting students' social-emotional health](#).
- Consider pulling together a team of educators, cultural liaisons, mental health professionals, administrators, parents, students (as appropriate), and community partners to identify (a) challenges students are facing (b) [culturally appropriate approaches](#) to social-emotional health for your families and (c) priorities and next steps.
- Determine which supports are in place and what might be needed, such as training, community outreach/partnerships, family engagement, or small group meetings.
- Continue to revisit these topics, particularly if new immigration policies are announced.
- Keep in mind that students might keep these concerns quiet out of fear for their safety.
- Respect student/staff privacy; nothing personal should be shared without permission.

Recommended resources

- [Sesame Street in Communities: Care, Cope, Connect](#) (Toolkit in multiple languages)
- [Bilingual activities and videos on self-expression from Sesame Street](#)
- [Stress and Coping Strategies for Immigrant-Origin Students and Educators who Serve Them](#) (Re-imagining Migration)

Recommended videos

- [When Immigration Status Impacts Younger Children](#) (Lori Dodson, ESOL Teacher – Maryland)



Learn about post-traumatic stress syndrome

Why this matters

More and more educators across the country are learning about the impacts of trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) on students. Researchers estimate that half of the U.S. student population has experienced or is still experiencing some type of trauma, violence, or chronic stress (Zacarian, Haynes, and Alvarez-Ortiz, 2017). One teacher wrote in our survey, “Staff need training in trauma-informed education and supporting students who've experienced many kinds of trauma. We brought in the Center for Victims of Torture to train our staff to support our specific refugee populations.”

For immigrant students, the sources of trauma may be complex and may be related to:

Their immigration story

- the reasons the family left their home country (such as war or wide-spread violence)
- difficult conditions, violence, sexual assault, or casualties during the journey to this country
- forced separation from a parent or sibling on the journey

Experiences related to immigration enforcement

- witnessing a loved one’s arrest
- being separated from a parent during interrogation
- a forced separation for an extended period of time
- detention in an immigration detention center
- coming into contact with immigration enforcement officers
- a lengthy separation from families or siblings

Current stresses

- stressful situations such as economic stress and homelessness
- other challenges at home, including domestic abuse.

Note: See the resources on addressing trauma in our resource section about [family separations at the border](#).



Tips for getting started

- Learn more about the [impacts of trauma](#) and signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for students the age group you work with.
- If possible, look for clues and try to learn a little bit more about your students' backgrounds, keeping in mind that every individual's situation is unique, even within a family, and protecting student privacy. Start with a trusted colleague, parent liaison or community partner. If appropriate, give students opportunities to [share their stories](#) privately, or, if they wish, with classmates.
- Discuss ideas for addressing students' needs with colleagues and identify next steps to implement those ideas.
- Learn more about trauma-informed instruction in the following resources.



Refugees and displaced families: The story behind the story

For educators working with refugees or displaced students, it can be helpful to learn more about the conflict or situation that caused students to leave their homeland or country of residence. This also can shed light on concerns that students continue to have for relatives still in the conflict zone. Here are some examples of resources that provide this kind of background information. Some of these resources include disturbing images.

- [Refugee Backgrounds](#) (Cultural Orientation Resource Center – archived information)
- [Supporting Syrian Refugees: Related Resources](#) (Colorín Colorado)
- [How the War in Yemen Became a Bloody Stalemate — And the Worst Humanitarian Crisis in the World](#) (*The New York Times*)

The same is true for students displaced by natural disasters who have also experienced trauma. For example, even though students from Puerto Rico are U.S. citizens, those displaced by Hurricane Maria faced significant challenges once they relocated to the U.S. Learn more in these resources:

- [Supporting Students and Educators from Puerto Rico After Hurricane Maria](#)
- [Why Immigrant Families May Have Unique Needs Before, During, and After Natural Disasters](#)



Trauma-informed instruction

- [The How and Why of Trauma-Informed Teaching](#) (Edutopia)
- [The Transformative Power of Trauma-Informed Teaching](#) (*Education Week*)
- [A Glimpse Inside the Transition to Trauma-Informed Practices](#) (KQED)
- [Essential Trauma-Informed Teaching Strategies for Managing Stress in the Classroom](#) (Concordia University-Portland)

Strategies and toolkits

- [Helping Students Heal Through Love and Trust: A Social Worker's Perspective on Serving Immigrant Youth](#) (Colorín Colorado)
- [Using a Strengths-Based Approach with ELs: Supporting Students Living with Trauma, Violence and Chronic Stress](#) (Colorín Colorado)
- [Trauma Toolkit: Tools to Support the Learning and Development of Students Experiencing Childhood and Adolescent Trauma](#) (First Book and Maryland State Education Association)
- [Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators](#) (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network)
- [Helping Traumatized Children Learn: Supportive School Environments for Children Traumatized by Family Violence](#) (Massachusetts Advocates for Children, Harvard Law School, and the Task Force on Children Affected by Domestic Violence)
- [Over the Hills and Far Away: Inviting and Holding Traumatic Stories in School](#) (Bank Street College of Education)

In the news

- [Trauma and Transitions: How San Diego Schools Grapple With Educating Refugees](#) (KPBS)
- [Lego Foundation and Sesame Street Team Up to Help Refugee Children](#) (*The New York Times*)
- [When Schools Meet Trauma With Understanding, Not Discipline](#) (NPR Ed)
- [For Traumatized Children, An Offer of Help from the Muppets](#) (NPR Ed)
- [A Pediatrician's Advice for Treating Student Trauma](#) (*Education Week*)
- [Student Trauma Is Widespread. Schools Don't Have to Go It Alone](#) (*Education Week*)
- [The Transformative Power of Trauma-Informed Teaching](#) (*Education Week*)
- [Student Trauma Is Real. But Connection Can Heal.](#) (*Education Week*)



Recommended videos

- [Video Playlist: What educators need to know about trauma](#)
- [When loud noises cause post-traumatic stress in schools](#) (Susan Stanley, Principal – Salina Elementary School, Dearborn , MI)
- [A distressing journal entry](#) (Glenn Maleyko, Superintendent – Dearborn Public Schools, MI)
- [Why not all changes in behavior require a special education referral](#) (Lori Dodson, ESOL Teacher – Maryland)





Addressing trauma

Santa Cruz, California

The school district of Santa Cruz, California [has launched a new program](#) with the help of the city government to help newly arrived youth from El Salvador fleeing gang violence. School officials report that newcomers have already begun sharing difficult stories of:

- the conditions that forced them to leave
- their dangerous journey to the U.S. (documented in the book [Enrique's Journey](#) by Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist [Sonia Nazario](#))
- reunions with relatives that they may not have seen for many years (or even met).

Additionally, school officials have received training on the impact of trauma on learning and are working to help ensure that immigrant students continue to have access to mental health services. You can learn more about this support from [this powerful article](#) written for Colorín Colorado with by social worker Nereida Robles.

Dearborn, Michigan

Salina Elementary School in Dearborn, Michigan is home to many students who come from war-torn regions of Yemen and have experienced trauma. Classical music plays in the morning on the loudspeaker, and the walls are covered with student work, creating a feeling of warmth and community throughout the building. Principal Susan Stanley notes that creating a calm, peaceful environment is especially important in her school because [loud noises, bells, and alarms](#) can trigger post-traumatic stress disorder for her students who have lived in war zones, so she makes sure that those kinds of disruptions are kept to a minimum. Staff are also trained on recognizing and addressing signs of trauma.

Prince William County, Virginia

Principal Nathaniel Provencio shares the story of a young boy from El Salvador whose behavior took an exceedingly negative turn. After repeated attempts at connecting with the mother, who was initially quite defensive, she finally shared that her husband had been murdered in El Salvador and the crime had been filmed. The young boy, in an effort to deal with the loss of his father, repeatedly watched the tragic video. The school team immediately switched into crisis intervention mode to address his trauma and connected the mother with legal support that had a positive impact on their situation.

