Inattentiveness and Hypervigilance in Students

Students who have experienced trauma may...

❖ Constantly look for and attend to perceived threats
❖ Rely on body language more than words, hence missing content

Ways to Create a Sense of Safety and Acceptance:

• Safety Through Physical Environment
  Harsh, rigid, and cluttered environments can overwhelm students and heighten hypervigilance. To prevent this, staff can:
  o Give students multiple options for seating
  o Soften lighting with lamps or scarves
  o Declutter classrooms

• Safety Through Voice, Facial Expression, and Movement
  For students who rely on body language, a harsh tone or stern face can register as a threat.
  o Staff should convey warmth, safety, and unconditional positive regard in their face and voice
  o Front office and parking lot greeters should be welcoming and give a warm first impression
  o To take care of others, staff must first take care of themselves. Staff should be supported by both school and district administration to practice wellness and discuss issues

• Safety Through Inclusion
  Negative, little, or no representation of a student’s identity in a classroom can cause a sense of shame or vulnerability or be perceived as a threat. Some ways staff can create a sense of safety and acceptance include:
  o Pronouncing names correctly, even if they have to ask to hear it multiple times
  o Study diverse content, such as books and examples used in class
    ▪ “Divya has $8 and each mango is $2. How many can she buy?”
  o Adding fields to make inclusive forms
    ▪ Multiple gender options
    ▪ Preferred names/pronunciation
    ▪ Preferred pronouns

Sequential Processing

Students who have experienced trauma may have a hard time...

❖ Following long lists
❖ Planning, hoping, and anticipating
❖ Managing time

Ways to Enhance Focus:

• Breaking Things Down
  o Break tasks down and illustrate
  o Check for understanding, teach-back
  o Collaborative work
  o Creative group forming
Trauma-Informed Education

The Assumption of Danger

Common triggers for students who have experienced developmental trauma:

- Perception of a lack of power
- Unexpected change/transitions
- Feeling shame
- Feeling vulnerable or frightened
- Feeling threatened or attacked
- Intimacy or positive attention

Ways to Create a Sense of Safety:

- **Describe rather than evaluate**
  
  Positive attention can sometimes feel threatening or disingenuous to students. Describe what the student has done that is good and let them evaluate themselves. This can give a student a sense of power in a situation and allow them to understand what they can do to succeed again. Describing is also a best practice for promoting a growth mindset, which is part of building resilience.

- **Respect students’ privacy and dignity**
  
  To prevent feelings such as shame, or a sense of being threatened or attacked, correct behaviors in a way that does not humiliate the student. Do not bring attention to the correction. This can look like silently putting a hand on the student’s desk to show only them that you are noticing their behavior or quietly discussing the behavior with a student while the rest of the class is engaged with something. Correcting away from the attention of others is less likely to cause the student to escalate.

  Discipline is about teaching, not punishment. You can help students understand the effects of their choices on themselves and others without creating the feeling within them that they are bad.

- **Transitions**
  
  Give students ample warning of transitions before they happen. Announce the transition 10, 5, and 1 minute beforehand to prevent surprises and give students a chance to self-regulate if they have a strong reaction to the next activity.

  Teach behavioral expectations for the new activity before the transition. For example, before going into the hallway, discuss which voice level is appropriate, perhaps using a chart. This explanation gives students a template on how to behave and gives them the power to confidently do what is expected of them.