

# Compassionate, Trauma-Responsive Schools

**R**ESearchers now know that exposure to extreme stress can affect several functions children rely on to succeed in school. It can, for example, affect their ability to concentrate, to retrieve information, to remain focused on their goals, and to control and regulate their emotions and related behavior. In fact, it can sometimes be very difficult to distinguish between the behavioral and physiological effects of extreme stress exposure and challenges associated with ADHD.

A group of educational visionaries from the state of Washington believe they may have a remedy: Create compassionate, trauma-responsive schools. The practices they advocate seem not only to address the emotional, behavioral, and academic needs of children suffering the effects of traumatic stress exposure. They seem to be ADHD-friendly practices as well.

## The Compassionate Schools Initiative

Under the auspices of the state's Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), Washington educators have created an infrastructure for creating compassionate schools that can help to mitigate children's stress-related learning problems, and improve their educational and learning outcomes. Schools can access the infrastructure through the state's Compassionate Schools Initiative, which provides limited training, guidance, resources, and technical assistance for schools considering adopting this framework.

The model—known as the Compassionate School Instruction, Discipline, and Curriculum Model—relies on six Compassionate Teaching and Discipline Principles that correspond to three Compassionate Curriculum Strategies, culminating in Overall School Curriculum and Activities.

Interested schools in other states can obtain a free download of the initiative's training manual—*The Heart of Learning and Teaching: Compassion, Resiliency, and Academic Success*. The handbook is also available for purchase as a spiral-bound book. Written by staff from OSPI and the Woodring College of Education at Western Washington University, the comprehensive manual provides specific strategies for creating a school where all children can feel safe and successful, regardless of their learning or other differences.

## Six Compassionate Teaching and Discipline Principles (How We Teach)

Guided by the maxim, “*You cannot teach the mind until you reach the heart*,” the model focuses on six teaching and discipline principles, each drawing support from the expanding research literature on resilience:

### **Principle One: Always Empower, Never Disempower.**

According to some experts in the field, it's this perception of powerlessness in the face of intense stress that distinguishes traumatically stressful experiences from less harmful ones. Providing children opportunities to experience real choices as well as a sense of personal control can be empowering, potentially outweighing a sense of helplessness in the face of challenging situations.

### **Principle Two: Provide Unconditional Positive Regard.**

Never underestimate the impact of a teacher-child relationship characterized by simple, sustained kindness. Experts in the field of resilience remind us how important a single trusting relationship with a teacher or other adult can be in the life of a child who experiences traumatic stress.

### **Principle Three: Maintain High Expectations.**

Consistent expectations, limits when expressed calmly and respectfully, and clear and predictable routines can create a perception of safety and stability for all children, including children suffering the effects of traumatic stress exposure.

### **Principle Four: Check Assumptions, Observe, and Question.**

Researchers now know that children vary in how traumatic stress exposure can affect their ability to function effectively at school. Researchers also now know that most children suffering the effects of traumatic stress exposure do not meet diagnostic criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. School staff need to be alert but refrain from judgement regarding any type of disproportionate reaction to what might be perceived as a relatively minor source of stress. As neuroscientist Joseph Ledoux says, “*The cost of treating a stick as a snake is less, in the long run, than the cost of treating a snake as a stick.*”



**Classroom climate and overall school culture is defined in large part by the quality of relationships between and among students, teachers, and other members of the school community.**

***Principle Five: Be a Relationship Coach.***

Classroom climate and overall school culture is defined in large part by the quality of relationships between and among students, teachers, and other members of the school community. Proponents of restorative practices (see the Promising Practices column in the June 2015 *Attention*) are aware of this, including how these practices significantly prevent and reduce school suspensions and expulsions.

***Principle Six: Provide Guided Opportunities for Helpful Participation.***

To feel we matter and have something important to contribute is a universal need, and one that, for some children, can go unmet. Compassionate schools provide all children with experiences that show them that they belong. Participation is not only for students; schools are encouraged to reach out to families and other community members to encourage them to be involved in the operation and enhancement of their school.

**Three Compassionate Curriculum Strategies (What We Teach)**

Described in detail in the training manual, the above six principles translate into specific classroom activities and

experiences that support three core domains:

***Domain One: Safety, Connection, and Assurance.***

Classroom experiences are designed to help children predict, prevent and navigate around triggers that set off “fight-flight-fright” behaviors. Once trained to see adverse childhood experiences through a trauma-responsive lens, teachers learn to redirect students prone to distraction, calm students prone to defensiveness or hypervigilance, to remind students about upcoming changes in daily routines, and to create “calm zones” and “safe places” that students can voluntarily access when emotions escalate. Safety plans also are woven into IEPs to insure that school staff know what to do

if and when behaviors pose a threat to personal safety.

***Domain Two: Improving Emotional and Behavioral Self-Regulation.***

The model provides students with a “vocabulary of feelings,” where they learn to recognize and name emotions and the triggers that set them off. Students are then better able to express and regulate emotions more appropriately which is key to their ability to learn. Students also learn ways to return to a more comfortable emotional state following a disproportionately strong emotional experience. In addition, classroom lessons draw upon cognitive behavioral strategies that help students see the relationship between thoughts, feelings, and actions. The curriculum is also rich in physical and sensory exercises known to calm and soothe children prone to strong and hard-to-regulate emotions.

***Domain Three: Competencies of Personal Agency, Social Skills, and Academics.***

Through classroom lessons, activities, and experiences, students learn that they have control of their outcomes, a mindset that can override perceptions of powerlessness. This can also develop executive function skills,

which are necessary to set and achieve personal goals. Lessons also draw upon the six principles to help students improve social skills and perform better academically.

### The model and students with ADHD

A wise person once said, “A man with one watch always knows what time it is. A man with two is never really sure.” Might some children exhibiting signs of ADHD—children rotating from one foster home to another, for example, or children growing up in violent homes or neighborhoods—instead be suffering the effects of exposure to extreme stress? Might some be impacted by both ADHD and extreme stress exposure? It’s not always easy to know.

The ideas of this group of educational visionaries may indeed represent a solution: Create schools where all children feel safe, feel they belong, feel a sense of control over their school life, and where they know they can count on the sustained kindness of those they encounter in the school community. Compassionate Schools training is not only for teachers but for everyone in the school who touches the lives of students, including the students themselves. The entire school community benefits from the compassionate climate, supportive culture, and healthy learning environment. 📍

A clinical and consulting psychologist, **Mark Katz, PhD**, is the director of Learning Development Services, an educational, psychological, and neuropsychological center in San Diego, California. As a contributing editor to *Attention* magazine, he writes the *Promising Practices* column and serves on the editorial advisory board. He is also a former member of CHADD’s professional advisory board and a recipient of the CHADD Hall of Fame Award.

#### LEARN MORE

Download the Compassionate Schools manual free of charge at <http://www.k12.wa.us/compassionateschools/>.

To learn more about Washington state’s efforts to create trauma-responsive schools, contact Ron Hertel at OSPI (email: [ron.hertel@k12.wa.us](mailto:ron.hertel@k12.wa.us); phone: 360-725-6042). He can also be reached at [theheartoflearningandteaching@gmail.com](mailto:theheartoflearningandteaching@gmail.com).



**BREHM**  
PREPARATORY SCHOOL

950 S. Brehm Lane | Carbondale, IL 62901 | (618) 457-0371

[Brehm.org](http://Brehm.org)

