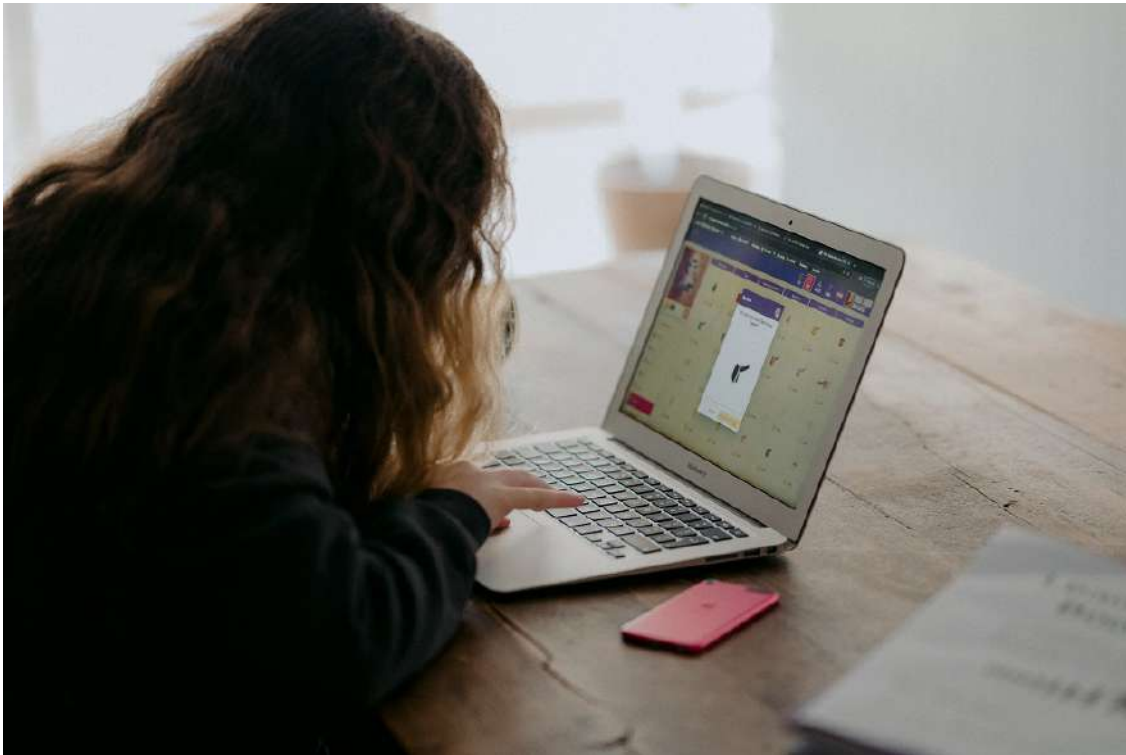


# 5 essential trauma-informed priorities for remote learning

By **Kate Stoltzfus** - April 7, 2020



Annie Spratt / Unsplash

**By Debbie Zacarian, Lourdes Alvarez-Ortiz, and Judie Haynes**

As the COVID-19 pandemic upended communities worldwide, millions of educators moved at warp speed from gathering face-to-face to sheltering at home. In a matter of days, human connection required some type of device or a six-foot distance. Against this backdrop, children continue to be exposed to [adverse childhood experiences \(ACEs\)](#) that are further exacerbated by the current health crisis. Trauma-informed practices to support students who are experiencing or have experienced childhood trauma are more urgent than ever. Here are five essential trauma-informed practices.

## A Strengths-Based Approach

The [National Association of School Psychologists](#) defines trauma-informed practices as fostering a feeling of safety, where trustworthiness, collaboration, empowerment, and acknowledgment of students' personal, social, cultural, and life experiences are present. We take it a step further and emphasize the urgency for implementing trauma-informed practices that draw from students' assets and strengths. It requires that we look beyond "what is lacking" to find "what is already there." We must also take time to learn about students' and families' personal, social, cultural, and life experiences to create successful remote learning experiences for everyone.

### 1. Set up a welcoming virtual classroom.

We are all experiencing a crisis that came on strong with little warning. Most teachers were given only a few hours to move out of their classrooms and a few days to prepare to begin teaching from home. Their first priority was to set up a visually comforting space for their 'online' students. Students may be feeling chronic anxiety or an inability to regulate their behavior, but visual comforts may ease some of that stress.

Among the items that teacher and author [Michael Silverstone](#) took from his classroom was the aquarium where the treasured class pet, a gecko named Cosmo, lives. He positioned his laptop so that Cosmo is visible to his students. He added plants and books to convey a sense of order that he feels is grounding for his students and leaned his guitar by the bookcase to remind them of music's importance. This preparation, he told us, gave him a sense of comfort and readiness to do remote teaching.



*Making sure students can see the class pet (even from home) gives them a sense of familiarity.*

After creating a comfortable workspace, take time to familiarize your students with the virtual learning and meeting tools you use. Understand that it is not enough to simply assign tasks and expect students to do them. Set digital classroom norms, including how students should raise their hand and take turns. Create an agenda for each class meeting and be sure to share it frequently with students to stay on track. Check in often to identify what is working and what needs improvements.

## **2. Practice self-care and work from your strengths.**

We are all professionals working outside of our comfort zones, and like many of our students, some of us will encounter more challenges than others. It's okay to feel that you are not a distance learning expert if you've never done this type of teaching before. Let your students know that this is new territory for everyone and that you're all learning and making mistakes together. Work with every connection that you have available to you (colleagues at work, family, friends) to help you to feel secure working from home.

When you are not working, engage in activities such as exercise, yoga, art, music, or other hobbies. Socialize virtually with family, friends, and coworkers. Take time to identify your unique strengths and draw from those. Michael Silverstone, the teacher we mentioned earlier, is also a musician. He weaves his musical passion into his teaching by incorporating singing into morning meeting rituals and has continued this practice remotely. Teacher Alamelu Sundaram-Walters, who is passionate about yoga and meditation, uses a [Hoberman Sphere](#) with her students for deep breathing and relaxation during online sessions.

## **3. It's all about relationships.**

Research shows the critical importance of relationships, particularly for those students living with ACEs. Building strong connections with our students may sound almost impossible when we cannot be in the same physical space, but we must take time to reach out, build 'new' online relationships, and support students in seeing their strengths through positive rapport. Larry Ferlazzo, a high school ESL and mainstream teacher, created a short [video](#) offering advice about how to stay connected with students in ways that are personal and caring. He works to build 1-1 relationships with students by doing regular check-ins by phone, Google chat, or Facetime, the way you would have in the classroom.

## **4. Use consistent routines coupled with positive interactions.**

Scholars tell us that using the same routines in classroom activities is critical for students who have been exposed to the unpredictable nature of trauma. During the COVID-19 crisis or any other type of adversity, we can support such students to downshift from a fearful state to a calmer one by using predictable routines coupled with positive interactions.

Take time to welcome each student personally to your collective online space and follow a routine for each meeting. ESL coach Leigh Ann Matthews begins every session by greeting students and asking how they're doing. She shares that she puts students' emotional needs first and is flexible about assignment design and due dates. High school science teacher Mary Angelo-Moi begins her online teaching sessions by asking students about their current situations before easing into lessons and questions. She also works with students 1-1 in chat mode to inquire about any special needs or concerns they may have.

It's also essential to provide examples of what you want students to do. Middle school teacher Ana Morales created a lesson on the COVID-19 virus and how to identify fact from fiction in news reports and online resources. She models how she wants pairs of students to use a Google doc to share evidence of online fact vs. fiction. She circulates among the various "Google document groupings" as students work and actively provides positive feedback and support.

## 5. Give students voice and choice

During times of adversity we all may experience feelings of hopelessness, disempowerment, and loss of control. This is particularly true for our students living with ACEs. Student empowerment allows real opportunities to participate, make decisions about what works, and exercise control over their learning.

Ana Morales, the teacher we mentioned earlier, asks pairs of students to create a two-minute presentation of their own choice (e.g., a song, a poem, an online poster) about their findings from the fact or fiction assignment. They have the option of presenting to the whole class 'live' or recording it. Ana also gives students a choice as to how often students check-in with her during her online office hours (daily, every other day, or weekly).

Using these trauma-informed practices can benefit our work with students living with adversity. It is important that any practice we implement has the underlying goal of making our students—and us—feel safe, valued, and part of the fabric of the virtual community.

**Debbie Zacarian, Lourdes Alvarez-Ortiz, and Judie Haynes** are the authors of *Teaching to Strengths: Supporting Students Living with Trauma, Violence, and Chronic Stress (ASCD, 2017)*.

---

---

Kate Stoltzfus