



**EJP** Education Justice Project



Northeast Houston AFT  
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**EDUCATION**  
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# SUPPORTING STUDENTS WHO ARE COPING WITH TRAUMA

## POST-DISASTER TIPS FOR EDUCATORS AND FAMILIES

Youth may experience **trauma** when events, like natural disasters, threaten their emotional and physical safety and well-being, and overwhelm their ability to cope.

**Trauma-informed care** is an approach to care that recognizes the impact of traumatic events and provides appropriate mental, emotional, and physical supports.

**Students who experience natural disasters** may be dealing with both the trauma of the disaster itself, and on-going trauma and stress related to unpredictable housing, the loss of friends and family, and a general absence of familiarity and stability.

**Schools can be an important source of care, stability, and safety** for students as they deal with post-disaster trauma. Educators should be equipped to recognize trauma and provide or connect students with appropriate supports and services.

## Some common behaviors exhibited by students experiencing trauma include:



- Behavioral challenges, or "acting out"
- Academic difficulties or trouble concentrating
- Strained relationships with friends and teachers

## Post-disaster trauma and the school-to-prison pipeline:

A study of post-Hurricane Katrina discipline in Louisiana public schools found that the use of exclusionary discipline, like suspensions, increased for displaced students following the hurricane, even though the behavior of many of these students could likely be understood and addressed through trauma-informed care.

Schools in Texas must be vigilant to ensure that administrators and educators do not rely on harmful exclusionary discipline practices, like suspensions and alternative school placements, to address behaviors that are actually symptoms of trauma. These behaviors must be addressed with appropriate supports and counseling, rather than punishment. Schools cannot risk re-traumatizing students by pushing them into the school-to-prison pipeline.

## Here are some simple ways to support students:

- Encourage all educators and staff to be kind, patient, empathetic, and to remember that students may still be experiencing difficult situations that impact their behavior, their emotional health, or even their ability to come to school prepared.
- Emphasize the importance of trauma-informed care: provide counselors, social workers, nurses, and other licensed professionals who are specifically available to students experiencing trauma.
- Train educators to understand signs of trauma so that they can refer students to counselors. Update educators regularly about the recent developments in services and recovery efforts so that they understand changes in students' lives.
- Provide care for educators. Teachers may also be experiencing post-disaster trauma and may not be aware of the stressors, biases, or triggers that could impact how they react to students and each other. Encourage teachers to check in and acknowledge they're only human---they should feel able to tell administrators and each other they are tired, upset, or need assistance. Appropriate care for teachers can help them to address the needs of their students.
- Discourage the use of harmful punitive discipline methods, like in-school and out-of-school suspensions, alternative school placements, and school police to address behavior.
- Help families understand the signs of trauma and how to respond appropriately. Encourage them to seek professional services if necessary.
- Create a safe space in the school building that students and educators can use whenever they need some time to regroup. The space can include soft music, dim lights, tea, essential oils, or other calming elements.
- Incorporate breathing exercises, calming music, yoga, and other relaxation strategies into classrooms and general assembly times.
- Incorporate music, creative writing, and art into the curriculum. These modes of self-expression can help students cope with trauma.
- Establish a morning routine that includes regular check-ins with students. Use age-appropriate methods to gauge how students are feeling, like a color scale for younger children and one word or sentence for older students.
- Ask for donations to schools that will serve the specific needs of the students. For example, if many students are experiencing homelessness, ask a business to donate a washer/dryer and make clean clothes available. Don't stigmatize children whose basic needs are not being met.
- Involve students in the recovery and rebuilding process when appropriate.

Resource produced by: [Texas Appleseed](#) | [Education Justice Project](#) | [Education Austin](#)  
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### Sources:

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