NCTSN The National Child Traumatic Stress Network

# Addressing Race and Trauma in the Classroom:

## A Resource for Educators

### PURPOSE OF THE GUIDE

This resource is intended to help educators understand how they might address the interplay of race and trauma and its effects on students in the classroom. After defining key terms, the guide outlines recommendations for educators and offers a list of supplemental resources. This guide is intended as a complement to two existing NCTSN resources—Position Statement on Racial Injustice and Trauma and Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators—and it should be implemented in accordance with individual school policies and procedures.

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## 1 What Are Trauma and Child Traumatic Stress?

Traumatic events involve (1) experiencing a serious injury to oneself or witnessing a serious injury to or the death of someone else; (2) facing imminent threats of serious injury or death to oneself or others; or (3) experiencing a violation of personal physical integrity. Child traumatic stress occurs when children's exposure to traumatic events overwhelms their ability to cope with what they have experienced. Traumatic events can have a wide-ranging impact on children's functioning and can cause increased anxiety, depression, symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, difficulty managing relationships, and, most important for educators, difficulty with school and learning. The traumatic event is what the child perceives as dangerous to himself or his caregiver. This perception varies by age and developmental stage and is particularly important in young children whose sense of safety is closely linked to the perceived safety of their caregivers.

When children and youth experience traumatic events, they often adopt strategies to survive these difficult life situations. Known as "survival coping," these strategies provide a context for understanding youth's behaviors following exposure to traumatic events (Ford & Courtois, 2009). Some strategies are adaptive and foster a sense of safety, for example, avoiding a route home where gun violence is likely to occur. However, a similar strategy in a different situation may instead be maladaptive, such as avoiding going to school for an extended period of time because school has become a reminder of gun violence. This strategy, if continued for a long period, can result in other consequences, such as losing contact with peers and falling behind in school.

## 2 What Is Historical Trauma?

Historical trauma is a form of trauma that impacts entire communities. It refers to cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, as a result of group traumatic experiences, transmitted across generations within a community (SAMHSA, 2016; Yehuda et al., 2016). This type of trauma is often associated with racial and ethnic population groups in the US who have suffered major intergenerational losses and assaults on their culture and well-being. The legacies from enslavement of African Americans, displacement and murder of American Indians, and Jews who endured the Holocaust have been transferred to current descendants of these groups and others. The result of these events is traumatic stress experienced across generations by individual members of targeted communities, their families, and their community. The impact is not only about what has happened in the past, but also about what is still happening in the present to target a group of people or actions by others that serve as reminders of historical targeting (Evans-Campbell, 2008).

Historical trauma is best understood from a public health perspective as it has implications for the physical, social, and psychological health of individuals and communities (Sotero, 2006). Patterns of managing stressful life events are highly influenced by the environment that shapes us. When caregivers' environments have been shaped by perceived and actual threats to their safety due to past traumatic experiences perpetrated against members of their community, they transmit implicit and explicit social messages to their children in an attempt to ensure their safety. Social messages imparted range from preparing children for discriminatory experiences to bolstering their pride in their ethnic/racial identity (Mohatt et al., 2014). Caregivers whose family members were directly exposed to historical traumatic events such as slavery and the Holocaust may have inherited biological changes in response to trauma in the form of heightened stress responses (Evans-Campbell, 2008). Furthermore, experiences of historical trauma within a community coupled with individual traumatic experiences can contribute to survival coping strategies that both reflect a community's resilience in the face of continued difficult life circumstances and heightened risks for experiencing community-level stressors such as community violence. Historical trauma provides a context for understanding some of the stress responses that children from historically oppressed communities use to cope with difficult situations.

## 3 What Is Racial Trauma?

Traumatic events that occur as a result of witnessing or experiencing racism, discrimination, or structural prejudice (also known as institutional racism) can have a profound impact on the mental health of individuals exposed to these events. Racial trauma (also known as race-based traumatic stress) refers to the stressful impact or emotional pain of one's experience with racism and discrimination (Carter, 2007). Common traumatic stress reactions reflecting racial trauma include increased vigilance and suspicion, increased sensitivity to threat, sense of a foreshortened future, and more maladaptive responses to stress such as aggression or substance use (Comas-Diaz, 2016). These traumatic stress reactions are worsened by the cumulative impact of exposure to multiple traumas. This is particularly important for youth in low-income urban communities where there is increased risk for community violence and victimization (Wade et al., 2014).

Racial trauma contributes to systemic challenges faced by groups who have experienced historical trauma (Lebron et al., 2015). For example, according to a recent report from the US Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, racial disparities persist in our education system: youth of color have disproportionately lower access to preschool, higher rates of suspension from preschool onward, and limited access to advanced classes and college counselors as compared to their white counterparts (US Dept. of Education, 2014). The racial achievement gap, which refers to disparities in test scores, graduation rates, and other success metrics, reflects the systemic impact of historical trauma and ongoing impact of racial trauma on communities of color (Lebron et al., 2015). Strategies for addressing racial trauma have centered on affirming and validating individuals experiencing traumatic stress reactions (Comas-Diaz, 2016). This is most effective when clearly identifying racism as a contributor to distress and supporting student's constructive expression of feelings and healthy self-development (Hardy, 2013).

## 4 Why Is This Important for Educators?

As students are exposed to the issue of racism through media, daily experience, and history, they need adult guidance to navigate all of the information and experiences. Students need avenues of discussion and information that are factual, compassionate, open, and safe. Youth's resilience and resistance to systemic oppression can be increased by creating an environment that acknowledges the role of systemic racism inside and outside of school, and how that is perpetuated by intergenerational poverty, current community unrest, and intentional targeting of young people of color by those in power.

While all students can be susceptible to distress from direct experience or viewing coverage of traumatic events related to racism, students from racial minority groups may be more likely to experience distress from acts of violence and aggression against people of color (Harrell, 2000). Repeated exposure to trauma-related media stories focusing on perceived racism can impact the student emotionally, psychologically, and even physically. Stories in the media may fail to acknowledge students' history, communities, or shared narratives of resiliency.

## 5 What Are the Effects of Racial Trauma by Age Group?

As noted earlier, responses to traumatic events vary according to the child's age and developmental stage. The Toolkit for Educators lists characteristics of trauma responses for children and youth of different ages. The effects of racial trauma add additional layers to these characteristics and are summarized here.

### Infants and Toddlers (0-36 months):

Although young children lack the cognitive abilities to identify and understand discrimination and racism they are not spared from their effects (Brown, 2015). These adverse conditions affect young children's development directly and by the deleterious environmental conditions that are created. Infants and toddlers experience developmentally appropriate fears and anxieties (separation, loss of parents, loss of body parts) (Van Horn & Lieberman, 2008). They are aware of sounds and sights in their environments and of their caregivers' emotional states. For young children, their perception of safety is closely linked to the perceived safety of their caregivers (Scheeringa and Zeanah, 1995). Being exposed to racially-motivated traumatic events toward them or their loved ones can be perceived as threats by young children who might respond with physiological or emotional difficulties. In addition, caregivers' own stressors, including the effects of racial trauma, can impact their emotional availability for their children and ability to protect them from danger and stress (Brown 2015, Van Horn & Lieberman, 2008).

### Preschoolers (Ages 3-5):

Children in this age range may exhibit behaviors in response to trauma that can include re-creating the traumatic event or having difficulties with sleeping, appetite, or reaction to loud sounds or sudden movements. In addition, if they are exposed to media reports of racial trauma (such as a police shooting), they tend to focus on sights and sounds and interpret words and images literally. They may not fully grasp the concept of an image being repeatedly replayed on television and may think each time that the event is happening over and over again.

### School Age Children (Ages 6-11):

Children in this age range often exhibit a variety of reactions to trauma and to racial trauma in particular. Much will depend on whether they have directly experienced an event or have a personal connection with those involved. School-age children tend to view media coverage in personal terms, worrying that a similar event could happen to them. This can lead to preoccupations with their own safety or that of their friends, which in turn can lead to distractibility and problems in school.

## Older Students (Ages 12-17):

Youth in this age range typically have a better understanding of events and the implications of issues such as racial trauma. They are also often still forming their identities and their views of the world and their place in it. High school-aged students may become fixated on events as a way of trying to cope or deal with the anxiety that they are feeling as a result. Older students may be exposed to a wide range of images and information via social media as well. They may benefit from discussing ways that they can promote positive changes in their communities.

# 6 What Can Educators Do?

Students cannot divorce themselves from events in their homes or communities simply by stepping into the classroom. This is especially true for students of color who come from communities that experience the effects of historical trauma and ongoing racial injustice. Educators are in a unique position to open up discussion about these issues, to provide guidance and modeling for constructive expression, and thus create the space for a trauma-informed classroom. Below are recommendations about how to proceed.

### 1

**Learn about the Impacts of History and Systemic Racism:** In order to constructively engage with students, educators must commit to foundational work to meet students' needs for honest discussion. Recognize that communities of color have had previous negative experiences with "helping systems," such as law enforcement, social and child protective services, mental and physical health care providers, and school systems, and that these encounters can result in significant distrust and be distressing for some students (Vaught & Castagno, 2008; Sotero, 2006). Learn about and prepare to discuss historical traumas perpetrated within the United States as the context for systemic racism in this country, including genocide, forced displacement, colonialism, slavery, Jim Crow laws, boarding schools, segregation enforced through terror, medical "research," etc.

- Understand the culture in which you are working and find cultural references that will resonate with your students. Be aware of your connection to the communities you are discussing. Recognize that even people who are members of the same racial or ethnic group may have very different life experiences, emotions, and responses. Be careful not to generalize about groups of people.

- Understand yourself and your own beliefs, biases, privileges, and responses, because this is an essential foundation for facilitating discussions with students. Take time to do the Implicit Association Test (Project Implicit, 2011) and reflect on what the results might mean about your own personal beliefs, biases, privileges, and/or responses.

### 2

**Create and Support Safe and Brave Environments:** Establish a safe and brave environment for discussing emotionally charged issues. This provides opportunities to first acknowledge the impact various traumas may have on students' academic experiences and then to create a safe space to engage academically (Bloom, 1995). A "safe" environment is one that promotes feeling safe both within oneself and from the risk of physical or psychological harm from others. In a trauma-informed classroom, psychological safety is clearly defined for students; potential triggers or trauma-reminders that may undermine psychological safety are identi-

fied; and plans are in place to help youth re-establish psychological safety when being triggered or experiencing traumatic stress reactions (see NCTSN Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators). A "brave" environment is one in which everyone is willing to take a risk in order to authentically engage. You can help students honor both safe and brave environments by doing the following:

- Highlight that all students need to have a sense of psychological safety and trust so that they can express their perspectives and listen respectfully to others' perspectives, even when there are disagreements.
- Prior to engaging in the discussion, set up options and provide clear directions for managing overwhelming emotional responses related to the discussion. These options could include permission to leave the room or to have a buddy to rely on for debriefing, processing, or support.
- Validate and de-escalate emotions when possible, but also realize that some students, especially those who have experienced complex trauma, often have difficulty identifying, expressing, and managing emotions.
- Check in with students periodically throughout the discussion, to ensure that they are managing emotional experiences in a healthy manner and that they continue to feel safe.
- Learn to recognize when a student's emotional responses can no longer be managed safely in the classroom setting and know how and to whom to refer for clinical intervention.

## 3

**Model and Support Honesty and Authenticity:** Be truthful and acknowledge that exploring and discussing race and experiences related to historical and racial trauma can bring up emotions for all students. Supporting students' ability to manage these emotions involves helping them develop skills to authentically express themselves (Singleton, 2014; Dickinson-Gilmore & La Prairie, 2005). Help students define racism, bias, privilege and inequalities so they can develop common language for discussion. (See the Definitions Sidebar.)

- As an educator, remember you don't have all the answers. That's okay. Learn to say "I don't know" or invite others to share their own answers instead.
- Be authentic and respectful with your students. It is natural to worry whether you are saying "the right thing." However, respectful authenticity is often more important because the chief contributor to a psychologically safe classroom is learning to have honest, albeit hard, conversations in healthy and constructive ways.
- Use processes (such as restorative or dialogue circles) to facilitate and support authentic discussions, even when conflict may be at the core.
- Practice by having conversations with other colleagues or staff before

### YOUNG CHILDREN

Helping young children process racially traumatic events will require practicing different skills, some of which are summarized below. For educators working with young children,

Consider that changes in behavior and mood might be the result of exposure to stressors, including instances of racial trauma affecting the child's family.

Provide a physical space for the child to feel safe

Support predictability in routines.

Help to connect behaviors with emotion by verbalizing possible feelings.

Support the children's caregivers.

Provide opportunities for emotion and body regulation by helping children calm their bodies and minds when they become upset.

Create developmentally appropriate and welcoming environments that impart messages of inclusion and diversity to children and their caregivers.

attempting dialogue with students. Get comfortable modeling the ability to have – and stay in – hard conversations. Differences of opinion, expression of real emotions, or challenging perspectives do not need to signal an end to conversation. Hearing others speak their truth can be painful, but this often means you are likely having honest conversations.

- Offer a variety of ways for students to deal with their emotions in productive, constructive, and meaningful ways. Consider devoting time to physical activities, art, music, and/or quiet time following these discussions.

- Honor and respect differences in emotions and responses just as you do differences in perspectives. Remember that no one has control over the impact their words have on others. Avoid responding angrily or defensively if someone interprets your – or someone else's – words differently than they were intended. As best as possible, attempt to clarify.

## 4

**Honor the Impacts of History and Systemic Racism:** Recognize that some students may be triggered when learning about or studying historical events related to racism. Honor their emotional responses and permit them to connect with support when needed. If discussing their perspectives will promote greater classroom psychological safety, leave time for discussion. In this case, students can be invited to share their own family and community stories, especially when learning about or studying this history in the classroom. Acknowledge that the impact of historical racism does not live in the past, but is an active part of the present.

- Help students and colleagues understand the connection between historical trauma, systemic racism, and community trauma in communities of color.

- Understand the culture in which you are working and find cultural references that will resonate with your students.

- Give students opportunities to share cultural stories and experiences in a variety of ways, such as using art and music, to validate their worldviews and give them an opportunity to develop their own interventions for coping and healing.

- Offer empathy and understanding to students who express distrust and distress, as these emotions are key to acknowledging the past hurt. Validate and honor students' experiences and emotions rather than trying to convince them that they no longer have a rational reason to feel that way. Avoid telling them that their past experiences should not affect their current beliefs.

- Use local and/or national issues to highlight the pervasive harms of racism on individuals and on communities.

## DEFINITIONS

**Racism**
The belief that all members of each race possess characteristics or abilities specific to that race, especially so as to distinguish them as inferior or superior to another race or races.

**Institutional Racism**
A system of privileges or disadvantages placed on one group by another group supported by such entities as government institutions, laws, policies, etc.

**Discrimination**
Action for or against an individual or group by an individual based on group membership.

**Bias**
Prejudice in favor of or against one thing, person, or group compared with another, usually in a way considered to be unfair.

**Privilege**
A special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group of people.

**Inequities**
Lack of fairness or injustice.

**Stereotype**
A real or imagined trait of an individual applied to a group.

**Prejudice**
A conscious or unconscious assignment of positive or negative value to the (perceived) traits of a group.

Merriam-Webster's dictionary (11th Ed.). (2016). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster.

## 5

**Encourage and Empower Students as Leaders:** Support students in their efforts to become engaged and promote healing in their school and home communities. Helping students feel empowered can promote wellbeing and counteract traumatic stress reactions that increase feelings of helplessness (Hardy, 2013).

- Study various movements in racial and social justice history to illustrate how individuals can make a difference.

- Help students think broadly about their options and opportunities for leadership. Some options might include organizing dialogues, small gatherings, or school events to discuss race and trauma, and to advocate for equity and inclusion; volunteering with local grassroots organizations; or helping to make messages of equity and inclusivity visible on school grounds, such as designing and displaying posters.

- Engage students directly and support student-led activism to help students experience teachers as allies. This can further enhance the learning experience, applying lessons learned in a meaningful manner as well as deepening trusting relationships.

- Create and support student-led activities and organizations that teach leadership skills through action. Make sure the activities are truly led by students and give them space and permission to be creative and heard.

## 6

**Care for Yourself:** Be introspective and reflective to better understand your own beliefs, ideas, and responses. Working with students who exhibit traumatic stress reactions in response to historical and racial trauma can be emotionally and psychologically draining for educators. Seek out assistance and secure support for yourself when needed (Keengwe, 2010; Carter, 2007).

- Reflect on your own identity and worldview, regardless of your race or cultural identity. Consider sharing reflections with other staff or colleagues and discuss about how your identity and worldview may impact your beliefs, biases, experiences, and responses.

- Keep in mind that these conversations about race and historical trauma, whether with colleagues or students, are often challenging, regardless of your race. Working to maintain a safe and brave environment for students while facilitating these discussions can add additional stress, difficulty, and exhaustion.

- Seek out various allies to help you process and grow as you address race and trauma in the classroom. Consider identifying allies who are of different races and cultures as well as those with whom you share racial or cultural experiences.

- Do what you can to process the stories, experiences, and images that bother you most with your colleagues and peers before engaging your students. Make sure you're emotionally ready to hear students' perspectives.

- Be ready to consult with parents, mental health staff, and community partners for assistance when addressing these types of issues in the classroom.

- Form a staff or colleague "buddy system" to practice using trauma-informed and culturally- responsive language and creating a safe and brave environment for students to discuss race.

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# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

*The following resources may also be useful to educators, although they do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the NCTSN.*


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