

Tips for Conducting Trauma Informed Drills

Creating a safe and healthy learning environment in schools is critical. This includes ensuring students, educators, and staff are prepared to handle potential hazards (evacuation, get inside, shelter in place, lockdown). According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, one in four children have experienced trauma that may affect their behavior. School staff should be aware that students who have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACES) may become dysregulated or re-traumatized by drills. As such, it is crucial that safety training utilizes a trauma-informed approach to maintain a school environment that meets students' physical, emotional, and social safety needs.

In preparation for safety drills schools should implement proactive practices to mitigate the impact of traumatic experiences which focus on teaching and training skills that individuals can use when they are feeling distress. These may include deep breathing, picking up or touching items near you, rhythmic movement, and savoring a scent, or flavor. By explicitly embedding social personal competency into daily instruction schools empower students to respond in potential crisis situations.

The best practice is to utilize developmentally appropriate language during instructions and discussions. For early elementary school students use brief/simple information that is balanced with reassurance that school is safe, and adults are there to protect them with simple examples of school safety (doors are locked, playground monitoring efforts, practice emergency drills). Upper elementary/early middle school students will be more vocal with questions and may need assistance separating reality from fantasy. Teachers should also discuss the efforts of the school and community leaders to provide safe schools. Upper middle school and high school students may have strong and varying opinions and may share concrete suggestions about how to make school safer. Teachers should emphasize the role students play in safe schools by not providing building access to strangers, reporting strangers on campus, and reporting threats to school safety.

During safety drills the school should provide clear, direct information, model a controlled response, emphasize following adult direction and model, inspire calm and confidence, reassure distressed students, and convey factual information as quickly as possible to minimize anxiety and fear.

After the drill, recognize trauma reactions and offer mental health crisis intervention assistance, provide an opportunity for students and staff to share reactions to the lockdown, ensure evaluation and debriefing of the safety drill is conducted. Use observations and conversations as opportunities to plan for future incidents, provide reassurance, and teach, support, and reinforce transferrable coping skills. The school or district should also have the public information officer or designee communicate facts quickly with parents, media, and neighboring schools.

The Tennessee Department of Education provides resources on implementing [Trauma-Informed Schools \(tn.gov\)](#) and understanding [Building Strong Brains / TN ACEs](#). Resources for conducting trauma-informed drills can be found at [Using A Trauma-Informed Plan For School Safety Drills \(navigate360.com\)](#) and [Trauma-Informed Active Threat Response Training for Schools | ALICE Training](#).