

Trauma-Informed Discipline Guide for Educators

Under [Tenn. Code Ann. § 49-6-4109](#), all LEAs and public charter schools in Tennessee must adopt a trauma-informed discipline policy. This law is part of a broader effort to address Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) in school environments. The department is responsible for providing guidance to help districts implement these policies.

Each policy must:

1. Balance accountability with understanding of trauma.
2. Reinforce that violent or abusive behavior is not allowed.
3. Focus on positive behavior supports and minimize disruption to learning.
4. Maintain consistent rules and consequences.
5. Model respectful, nonviolent relationships.

Why Trauma-Informed Discipline Matters?

Children who experience trauma may:

- Struggle with regulation and executive functioning.
- Be triggered by perceived threats or authority.
- Respond with aggression, withdrawal, or defiance.

Trauma-informed practices help educators:

- Understand the “why” behind behaviors.
- Maintain safe and supportive classrooms.
- Prevent re-traumatization through punitive discipline.

Recommended Practices for Educators

Build Safety & Trust

- Greet each student warmly by name.
- Set clear, predictable routines.
- Use calm tone and body language during escalations.

Teach and Reinforce Expectations

- Explicitly teach classroom and school rules.
- Use visual aids, reminders, and consistent language.
- Provide praise for positive behaviors (e.g., “I noticed you waited patiently...”).

Use Restorative and Reflective Practices

- Encourage students to reflect on behavior (not just punish).
- Use circles or peer mediation to resolve conflicts.
- Allow space for “cool-down” time or breaks when needed.

Minimize Exclusionary Discipline

- Avoid suspensions for minor infractions.
- Prioritize in-school alternatives (reset rooms, behavior coaching).
- Track and analyze discipline data to identify disproportionality.

Implement Behavioral Support Plans

- Collaborate with school counselors, social workers, and RTI2-B teams.
- Create Functional Behavior Assessments (FBAs) and Behavior Intervention Plans (BIPs) when appropriate.
- Use incentives and individualized support strategies.

Practical Strategies for Classrooms

Responding to behavior through a trauma-informed lens

This section helps educators translate trauma-informed principles into everyday classroom responses, with concrete language and interventions that support student dignity, reduce disruptions, and maintain a safe learning environment.

Common Scenario	Traditional Reaction	Trauma-Informed Approach	Why This Works
Student refuses to do work	Send student to office, mark as defiant	Offer choices: <i>"Would you like to start with question 1 or 3?"</i>	Choice empowers students and reduces power struggles
Student yells or curses	Immediate discipline referral	Respond calmly: <i>"It sounds like you're really upset. Let's take a break and check back in."</i>	A calm presence de-escalates tension and models regulation
Student disrupts lesson with jokes or talking	Reprimand or remove from class	Quietly redirect with a nonverbal cue or proximity, then praise when on task	Preserves dignity and minimizes peer attention to misbehavior
Student gets up and walks around the classroom	Demand they sit down or write them up	Ask: <i>"Do you need a movement break? Want to stand at your seat?"</i>	Meets sensory needs without confrontation
Student doesn't turn in work repeatedly	Call home or assign zeros	Schedule a check-in to explore barriers and problem-solve together	Builds trust and supports executive functioning skills
Student leaves class without permission	Mark as skipping and notify admin	Upon return, say: <i>"Glad you're back. Want to talk about what you needed?"</i>	Welcoming return prevents shame and encourages accountability
Student has repeated emotional outbursts	Treat each as isolated behavior	Track patterns, connect with counselor, consider an FBA	Recognizes behavior as communication and leads to better support
Classroom conflict between students	Separate students and warn them	Facilitate a restorative conversation when calm	Encourages empathy, ownership, and repair of relationships
Student shows signs of anxiety or shuts down	Pressure to perform or participate	Provide a quiet space, reassure them they're safe, offer to check in later	Honors the student's emotional state and reduces overwhelm
Student arrives angry or withdrawn	Begin class as usual, ignore signs	Greet warmly: <i>"I'm glad you're here today. Let me know if you need anything."</i>	Builds connection and communicates care from the start

Additional Classroom Tools:

- **Break cards:** Give students the option to signal when they need a break without disruption.
- **Regulation stations:** Create a corner with calming tools (e.g., stress balls, noise-canceling headphones).
- **Visual schedules:** Help reduce anxiety and uncertainty for students impacted by trauma.
- **Collaborative problem-solving:** Instead of punishment, use conversation to work through problems together.
- **Behavior-specific praise:** Replace “good job” with “I appreciate how you waited your turn just now—that showed patience.”

Implementation Tips

- Practice responses with your team to maintain consistency across classrooms.
- Communicate expectations clearly and revisit them after breaks or high-stress periods.
- Incorporate emotional check-ins (e.g., “mood meters,” “feelings charts”) into your morning routines.
- Partner with school mental health staff (school counselors, social workers, psychologists) to co-develop behavior plans or supports.

Resources

- [Trauma-Informed Schools](#)
- [About Response to Instruction and Intervention \(RTI²\) in Tennessee](#)
- [Building Strong Brains / TN ACEs](#)
- [Resilient TN](#)
- [Conflict Resolution Guidance Document](#)

Disclaimer: This guide does not replace official policy. LEAs must develop their own trauma-informed discipline policies. School administrators are encouraged to review local board policy and consult with school-based behavior and mental health professionals when implementing practices.