Psychological First Aid-TEACH

A Crisis Response Guide for K–12 Educators

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Dedication

Everytown for Gun Safety, a nonpartisan gun violence safety group, reported that 2021–2022 was the worst period for gun violence on record, with 193 incidents of gunfire on K–12 school grounds. Such staggering statistics resulted in multiple recommendations, notably the creation of evidence-based crisis assessment/prevention programs and trauma-informed emergency planning. Additionally, many researchers and health organizations, including the National Institute of Mental Health, the Institute of Medicine, and the US Department of Health and Human Services have supported the development of early, brief, and focused interventions that can reduce the social and emotional distress of children and adults after traumatic events. This support led to the creation of psychological first aid, the approach on which our intervention is based.

We created PFA-TEACH to build on the knowledge and communication skills of every adult who works in a school. This manual is inspired by the anonymous cafeteria worker and unsung heroes in the Oklahoma City Public Schools who first led us to develop PFA-TEACH for K–12 schools. When the bomb blast at the Murrah Federal Building sent shock waves directly into the cafeteria worker's school, shattering windows and the brick façade, she sprang into action. She ran to the classroom closest to the cafeteria, and in her own words, "gathered as many babies as I could. I pulled them close to me and said: 'You don't have to be afraid. I'm here to take care of you now.'"

In a few actions and words, she took time to comfort them by:

1. Establishing an immediate feeling of trust
2. Conveying empathy and understanding
3. Acknowledging how frightening the experience was for them and making their safety her priority
4. Providing them with the powerful connection of a caring adult
5. Giving them hope through her warmth, her calmness, and her nurturing behavior

We want to express our gratitude to her and to all of you who work in schools. We appreciate your enduring commitment to education and safety.

This manual is dedicated to all the administrators and school support services staff who are immersed in crisis intervention daily. It is also for all teachers who are looking out for the well-being of their students as they teach. Most importantly, to all other school professionals—front office personnel, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, custodians, and others—this is for your tireless work in helping schools function and the effortless way you lean into your humanity to connect with and help students and colleagues recover and thrive.

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Acknowledgments

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CHAPTER 3

Talk to Trust

In this chapter, you'll:

1. Learn how trust supports emotional regulation
2. Identify the actions and personal characteristics that promote trust
3. Use conversation starters and active listening to build trust
4. Understand the importance of making time to build relationships and establish trust

Introduction

The *T* in PFA-TEACH stands for trust, the foundation of all meaningful relationships. Trust is the basis for effectively working with students who have experienced a crisis or traumatic event. Although you may be able to quickly establish a relationship with a student you don't know well, more often than not building trust takes time. It also requires talking to students about difficult and possibly negative experiences. Without a solid foundation of trust, you might be reluctant to speak with students after a crisis or traumatic event or to ask about students' distress because you feel unsure of what to say or how to say it. As daunting as it may seem, building trust is a skill that you can develop through practice and self-reflection.

Reflection Activity 1

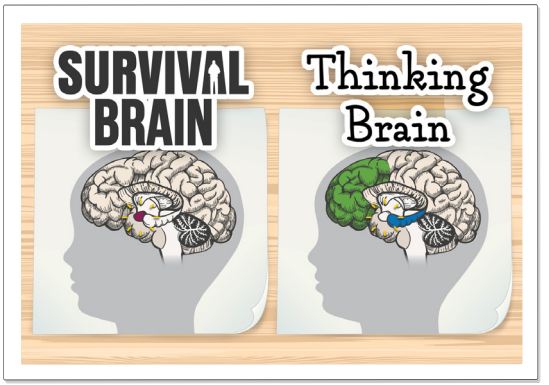
Check all that apply.

I might hesitate to talk to a student in crisis because...

- ☐ I don't know how and where to begin.
- ☐ I can't fix it.
- ☐ I don't know what to say.
- ☐ I'm not good in a crisis.
- ☐ I'll make it worse.
- ☐ The student doesn't know me.
- ☐ I don't have the answers.
- ☐ I might cry or panic while talking to the student.

Why else might you hesitate?

Trust



In Chapter 2, we explained how stress and crises activate the amygdala, what we can think of as our survival brain. When this happens, the "thinking brain" is temporarily less engaged. Trust can help us fix this problem. When we trust and feel trusted, the brain releases oxytocin, a hormone associated with empathy, safety, and trusting relationships. Oxytocin soothes the amygdala, letting us reengage with our thinking brain. This neurological response is why trust is essential to the PFA-TEACH process. It allows students to take a step toward recovering from a crisis or traumatic event.

Defining Trust

Consider these two definitions of trust:

- "Assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something" (*Merriam-Webster*)[1]
- "Firm belief in the integrity, ability, or character of a person or thing; confidence or reliance" (*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*)[2]

What do these definitions have in common? Both underline factors needed for us to connect or interact in meaningful ways with others.

In the context of mental health, there are additional factors to consider. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) states that trust is affected when individuals experience crises or trauma. These events may occur when a trusted system breaks down, or the events themselves may be the cause of distrust. According to SAMHSA, such experiences may lead to "feelings of betrayal, shattering a person's trust and leaving them feeling alone."[3] Because of these high stakes, SAMHSA has identified trustworthiness as one of the key principles in any trauma approach or response.

To prevent further damaging trust, you must continue to build and maintain the trust of individuals exposed to crises or trauma. Investing in trust can give those who are in crisis confidence in your ability to respond to and support them.

> When we trust, we are braving a connection with someone.
>
> —Brené Brown, "The Anatomy of Trust" (2015)

Being Trustworthy

What makes someone trustworthy? What would make someone willing to brave a connection with you? Research suggests that, in an educational setting, there are five key individual characteristics that make someone worthy of trust.[4]

Benevolence	Having confidence that your well-being or something you care about is protected by the people you trust
Honesty	Viewing the trusted person as someone who is authentic and who doesn't distort the truth
Openness	Seeing the trusted individual as someone who shares relevant information and is willing to hear the thoughts, opinions, and feelings of others, particularly when they may be negative or difficult to hear
Reliability	Demonstrating consistent behavior and creating a sense of predictability
Competency	Having the skills and knowledge to successfully accomplish tasks within your scope of work

It's not enough to know about these characteristics. You need to show them. Fortunately, students have identified specific practices educators can use to build trust.[5]

1 Demonstrating flexibility and patience

During the PFA-TEACH process, you could demonstrate flexibility and patience by letting students share their feelings and experiences if and when they feel comfortable and by identifying appropriate accommodations for students.

2 Being consistent and predictable

During the PFA-TEACH process, you could demonstrate consistency and predictability through routine check-ins.

3 Promoting relationships and connections

During the PFA-TEACH process, you could promote relationships and connections through simple actions, such as remembering important facts about students and conducting check-ins that focus on their strengths, difficulties, and interests.

Reflection Activity 2

Think about the individuals you trust. Write down at least five traits or actions that make those people trustworthy.

1.	6.
2.	7.
3.	8.
4.	9.
5.	10.

How do you model trustworthiness with your students?

Talk

The *T* in TEACH also stands for talk. Talking has an important function in the psychological first aid process. Why? Because verbalizing feelings can make difficult emotions such as sadness, anger, and even anxiety feel less intense.[6] Talking helps us make sense of our experiences, which can improve our ability to cope. It also gives us time to gather important information that can help us assess others' emotional states and their coping skills, and it can give us an opportunity to address immediate concerns.

At times, you may worry that you'll say the wrong thing to students, especially if you're talking to someone you don't know well. But all you need to get across initially is that you're approachable, open to listening without judgment, and willing to discuss difficult topics.

Ways to start a conversation:

- ✓ A nonjudgmental statement
- ✓ An acknowledging statement
- ✓ A nonjudgmental observation
- ✓ An open-ended question

If you ask a question, keep it simple. You can ask *what*, *when*, and *where*, but avoid *how* and *why*, both of which can imply judgment or criticism. Your conversation opener will depend on your relationship with the student in crisis. If this is your first time meeting the student, you won't be able to approach them the way you might approach someone you know well.

Scenario

A teacher who has an established relationship with a student starts a conversation.

I've missed seeing you in class. Were you sick, or did you have a hard time coming back after the fights at school?

Note

The teacher refers to the specific event that occurred, inviting the student to talk about the event as well. Your goal is to create a safe space for students to share without making them feel pressured nor judged. You need to use your judgment and your existing knowledge about the student to determine the best approach. If a student does not feel comfortable discussing the situation, you should let them know that they can talk to you if and when they're ready.

Talking to Someone You Don't Know

In some cases, you may need to deliver PFA-TEACH to individuals with whom you don't have an existing trusting relationship. The following examples may help you approach students in these circumstances.

Scenario

Hi. I'm a crisis counselor, and my job is to help students feel better after the kind of event you all experienced last week. I'm here to listen to you and talk about what happened. Can you tell me how things have been for you since the event?

Note

The crisis counselor introduces herself to the student, explains her role, and discusses why she is at the school. She follows her introduction with an open-ended question that invites the student to share their experience.

Scenario

Your math teacher cares about how you're doing, and she told me she's worried about you. She said you usually love math class, but you seem to be struggling. Knowing what you're feeling can help me and your teacher help you.

Note

The crisis counselor builds a bond by mentioning that the student's teacher is concerned about them and by explaining why sharing their feelings could be beneficial.

Communication Techniques

No matter how well you know someone, you should be careful about what you say and what you do during the conversation.

What to say

- *I can see that this experience is difficult for you. I am here to support.*
- *I'm wondering whether it's distracting for you when you keep thinking about what happened. I'm here if you want to talk about it.*
- *This experience seems like a lot to handle. How can I support you?*

What not to say

- *You will get over this.*
- *Just stop thinking about it.*
- *It's not that bad. It could be worse. You just have to move on.*

Do

- ✓ Acknowledge and affirm students' experiences and struggles
- ✓ Help students label their feelings
- ✓ Ask open-ended questions that let students talk about their experiences and feelings
- ✓ Empower students to work together to address their experiences and struggles
- ✓ Talk less than students

Don't

- ✗ Minimize or deny students' experiences and struggles
- ✗ Minimize or deny students' feelings
- ✗ Discourage students from sharing their experiences and feelings
- ✗ Judge, advise, fix, rescue, blame, or shame students
- ✗ Talk more than students

These communication techniques build trust and connections with students. As a result, the survival brain calms down and the thinking brain has greater control. Once students are in this state, you can have a productive conversation to better understand their needs and figure out how you can best support them. Other chapters in this manual will explore how to handle these later conversations.

Practice Activity 1

Review the communication techniques in the previous section. Check all the appropriate statements or questions you can use to build trust and encourage students to engage with you.

- ☐ Why were you in the hallway when the fight started?
- ☐ I want you to know that when you're ready to talk, I'm here to listen.
- ☐ What can I do to help you right now?
- ☐ What is going on with you? I know you're a much better student than this.
- ☐ You should try to forget about what happened and move on.
- ☐ Tell me how you've been doing since the accident.
- ☐ I don't think what happened was that bad.
- ☐ I heard what happened yesterday. That must be difficult for you.

Active Listening

Imagine this scenario: You've begun a conversation with a student by using a nonjudgmental observation or question, and the student has started sharing their experience. You're not done yet. There's one more thing you should do while the student talks: use active listening.

Active listening is different from the kind of listening we usually do, which involves simply absorbing information. When we actively listen, we use verbal and nonverbal cues to let the speaker know that we hear and understand what they're saying.

You can actively listen by:

- Making eye contact
- Leaning toward the speaker
- Nodding
- Using verbal cues, such as "I see," "I hear you," and "can you tell me more?"

Note

With younger children, it's especially important to be eye level during conversations. If the children are standing, consider kneeling as you make eye contact. If the children are sitting, try sitting across from them in a chair or on the floor.

These simple exchanges can make others feel seen and connected, feelings that build trust and help calm the survival brain. In fact, active listening can be a powerful intervention on its own.

Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication is an important part of active listening. You should be aware of your nonverbal cues and signals. At the same time, you need to observe the cues and signals of the people you're supporting.

Pay attention to:

- Facial expressions
- Body movement and posture
- Gestures
- Eye contact
- Touch
- Space
- Voice

During crisis responses, effective active listening often involves being able to tolerate the difficult emotions and experiences that individuals share. Active listening also requires an understanding of your own thoughts, feelings, and assumptions. What does this mean in practice? You need to understand how students' experiences might bring up thoughts and feelings about challenges in your own life. You also need to be aware of the assumptions that you may be applying to students' actions or responses.

Reflection Activity 3

Understanding your own thoughts, feelings, and assumptions is an important part of engaging with and supporting students in crisis. Reflect on your past experiences responding to individuals in the aftermath of a crisis.

What was most difficult or scariest about hearing their experience?

Were you reminded of your own experiences? If yes, how?

How did you manage your own reactions to the student's experience?

What knowledge or supports would have been helpful?

Making Time

Making time to connect with students is easier said than done. Educators grapple with multiple responsibilities and constant distractions every day, and they have little time to spare.

These competing demands can become even more overwhelming in the aftermath of a crisis at school or in the community. Still, finding even five minutes to talk to students who are experiencing distress can help them feel safe, build trust, and improve their coping skills. These benefits support students' overall well-being.

Before a crisis takes place, make sure to identify other professionals at your school who can give you immediate support. Having their help can be invaluable when you need to address the needs of your entire class and the needs of individual students in crisis at the same time.

Making time does not mean forcing conversations. If students don't want to talk, be patient. The process takes time. Insisting that students talk to you erodes trust and make them less likely to open up to you later on. Remember: the simple act of approaching students can be a signal that you are someone they can trust and come to when the time is right. Check back with them regularly so they know you are available if they decide they want to talk.

Reflection Activity 4

Think about your past experiences.

What do you find challenging about responding to students' needs individually?

1.	6.
2.	7.
3.	8.
4.	9.
5.	10.

In the days and weeks after a crisis, when might you have time to talk to a student?

☐ Planning period	☐ Before school
☐ Recess	☐ After school
☐ Class activities	☐ Lunch
☐ Passing period	

What other times have worked well for you?

Conclusion

The *T* in PFA-TEACH—trust—is the first building block in the psychological first aid process. Although actions can build trust, the process is as much a mindset that guides interactions with students as it is a defined set of steps. When you start with the goal of making students feel safe and heard, you are more likely to take actions that reflect that goal.

To summarize the basics of trust:

- Use nonjudgmental statements, observations, and open-ended questions to begin conversations
- Use active listening skills to show that you hear and understand what is being shared
- Consider your own assumptions
- Make time to connect with students
- Show that students' safety and well-being is important to you with your calm and patient attitude

Once you establish trust with students, you can begin to teach them about the effects of trauma, address their immediate concerns, connect them to resources, and, ultimately, help them move toward hope and healing.

Let's Practice with Malik: Talk to Trust

Read Malik's scenario, and review the dialogue between Malik and the crisis responder. Then answer the questions about how the crisis responder uses talk-to-trust skills during the conversation.

Malik is a high school junior and a drummer in the marching band. Two weeks ago, his band teacher, Mr. Jackson, was killed in a car accident. Malik was close with Mr. Jackson and considered him a mentor. He was well-liked by his colleagues and popular with other students as well. The loss has been felt throughout the school. When news of the accident got out, district leaders and the school's principal activated the district and school crisis response plan, which included bringing in a crisis team. For the first week after the accident, crisis team members provided support to both teachers and students, and administrators decided to have two responders stay for an additional week.

Malik met with one of the crisis responders a few days after the accident. He told her he was feeling sad but also said that he felt supported by his teachers and friends at school and by his family at home. Malik did not accept additional supports at that time.

At the end of the second week, Malik's teachers informed the attendance office that he'd been absent multiple days, and campus security reported that he'd been seen roaming the campus during class time. An administrator has asked the crisis responder that Malik met with before to check in with him.

Hi, Malik. I'm not sure if you remember me. I'm Heidi. We met last week after you found out about Mr. Jackson's passing.

Yeah, I remember you.

I hope it's OK for us to reconnect. I appreciated how willing you were to share your memories of Mr. Jackson with me. I really got a sense of how much he meant to you.

You remember that?

You sound surprised.

You probably saw a lot of people. I didn't think you'd remember.

Well, your stories about him stuck with me. I can see why you liked him so much. I especially liked the one where he chaperoned one of your field trips.

Yeah. That trip was a lot of fun.

It sounds like he was a really good teacher. And a good person.

He was. I can't stop thinking about him.

That's understandable. He meant a lot to you. People here really cared about him. They care about you, too. The school wants to make sure everyone feels supported during this time. Do you want to tell me more about him? What was he like in the classroom?

He was great. He never got mad when we were goofing off. Just stood there in the middle of the room not talking until we noticed and shut up. On opposite day, he dressed up in this really stupid outfit and wore it the entire practice. It was pretty funny. And he kept Christmas lights up all year. We gave him a hard time about it, but most of us actually liked it.

Practice Activity 2

Check all that apply.

In this scenario, what does the crisis responder do to build trust with Malik?

- ☐ Reintroduces herself and reminds Malik about her role at the school
- ☐ Explains that she's checking in with him again because he's done something wrong
- ☐ Remembers important details of their prior conversation
- ☐ Tells Malik that he can only be sad for so long and that he needs to move on
- ☐ Uses nonjudgmental conversation starters

Reflection Activity 5

Think about how you might approach a student about a similar situation (the death of a teacher).

How might you manage your own reactions and emotions?

What actions would you take to build trust with a student so they feel comfortable talking with you?

Practice Activity Answer Key

Practice Activity 1

Review the communication techniques in the previous section. Check all the appropriate statements or questions you can use to build trust and encourage students to engage with you.

- ☐ Why were you in the hallway when the fight started?
- ☑ **I want you to know that when you're ready to talk, I'm here to listen.**
- ☑ **What can I do to help you right now?**
- ☐ What is going on with you? I know you're a much better student than this.
- ☐ You should try to forget about what happened and move on.
- ☑ **Tell me how you've been doing since the accident.**
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- ☐ Tells Malik that he can only be sad for so long and that he needs to move on
- ☑ **Uses nonjudgmental conversation starters**

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