

Trauma-Informed Leadership During a Pandemic

Rising to the Challenge

Quick Reference Guide

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**NORTH AMERICAN CENTER™
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**Rising to the Challenge: Supporting our Administrators,
Teachers and School Personnel with Multi-Platform
Communication with Students and Families**

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(Listen to the Introduction to the Full Document:)

<https://soundcloud.com/user-251644670/introduction-rising-to-the-challenge>

Purpose of this Document:

This Quick Reference Guide has been developed for administrators, teachers and support staff to assist with the emotional and traumatic response to the pandemic. This Guide integrates knowledge gained from the practices of Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRA™), as well as Traumatic Event Systems Response (TES™). For more detailed information, refer to the full document, “*Rising to the Challenge: Staying Connected with All of Our Students*” (<https://www.nactatr.com/risingchallenge.html>).

While education is our priority, creating the context for learning will not occur without thoughtful consideration of how heightened anxiety can influence students, families, and the professionals who are responsible for helping. We recognize that as our front-line staff you will be the primary contacts with our students and their families.

Background:

Although the pandemic has placed us in a time of uncertainty, there are two things that we know. Firstly, we are *all* in the impact zone, therefore we are all impacted, in varying degrees, by what is happening. Secondly, it is more challenging to support others when we are unable to support them in person. Fortunately, many have had experience in connecting with others through technology, so we are being given an opportunity to further expand this into our world of education.

This is a temporary circumstance of unknown duration. The good news is that the same variables that have helped schools recover from traumatic events in the past are the same reliable variables that will help to lower the stress and anxiety now. What we know about recovery in general is that we must:

- Get students and staff back to a routine in order to have predictability in our lives again
- Draw strength from positive social and emotional connections

Guidelines for Administrators, Teachers and School Personnel:

1. When assessing student and family needs, consider the following:

- **What is your role in contacting the student/parent?** Consider what resources you can offer and know your limitations. *Teachers are not expected to be crisis counsellors.* Consult with the administrator or designated contact if there are students and families that you are concerned about and who you feel need further support through the school division or community.

- **Who are the students with specialized needs (i.e., learning, cognitive, emotional, behavioral)?** Who is the best person to connect with this student and family? What other supports may be needed?
- **Who are the students and families at risk?** Consider those with trauma history, such as abuse, chaotic family situations, substance abuse, financial stresses, etc. Who is the best person to connect with this student and family? What other supports may be needed? (See Diagram A p.5 Click the Link – <http://nactatr.com/files/2020NACTATR-RisingChallenge.pdf#page=5>)
- **Who has been the primary parent/caregiver contact for this student?** What is the family configuration? Consider that this may have shifted, depending on who is at home. This will have an impact on family dynamics and family functioning. Consider the best time of day to call given what you know about the family. Ideally, make *educational* contact with the student during times they have identified as lower stress. For those providing *emotional* support, contacting the student or parent during times of high stress may be beneficial. (Listen to the Audio: Family Dynamics During the Pandemic <https://soundcloud.com/user-251644670/introduction-family-dynamics>)
- **What role has school played in this student’s (and family’s) life?** Is the school a source of primary emotional support for the student and/or guardian? Consider that for some, the loss of this support may lead to feelings of abandonment and fear due to the physical loss of the school staff and peer connections. Reconnecting online or by phone will be a way to re-establish relationships and rapport. (See Graphs Primary and Secondary Emotional Support p.9 <http://nactatr.com/files/2020NACTATR-RisingChallenge.pdf#page=9>)
- **What previous conflicts or stresses exist in the home-school relationship?** Again, consider who is the best person to contact the student and family, to ensure the best possible student and parent engagement. If there are pre-existing conflicts, these need to be considered in the communication plan. For some parents, there is significant anxiety dealing with the school, even at the best of times. The pandemic has shifted the dynamic because now the school is entering the student’s homes. There are opportunities to create new relationships. (See 8-Step Process: Preparing for Matching Resources to Risk p.11 <http://nactatr.com/files/2020NACTATR-RisingChallenge.pdf#page=11>)
- **Who else in the community may need to be aware?** Crisis supports continue to be available throughout our school communities, as well as our “duty to report” to police or child welfare. If you are concerned about a student and family, consult with your administrator or designate.

2. Offer calm to students & parents. Create a level playing field by being open and honest about the pandemic and how it has changed the way we do business. Let them know you are glad to be assigned as the contact for their child, and that you are aware you are entering their space/home and want to be respectful of the changed dynamic. Underscore the reason for your contact: to collaborate to support the student’s learning.

3. Listen. While you may not be able to offer solutions to concerns that are presented, you can be a supportive listener and offer to seek information/resources (as appropriate) and normalize

their emotional responses. Align with parents/caregivers in a healthy way about how, together, we will approach the new learning format and the challenges that may come with it.

4. Focus on facts and redirect conversations to *what is known* and *what we can control*. Because there is uncertainty, people will have lots of questions and concerns. To promote calmness, keep conversation focused on the *here and now*, rather than speculating about the future. Ensure they know there will be communication from the government and school board before any return to school is initiated. Stay informed about the most recent communications in order to provide helpful information and have reliable resources available to share.

5. Be a ‘naturally open leader.’ Be truthful, but supportive. Be genuine and be yourself. Students/parents need to know that they are being considered and supported. A short, meaningful conversation can go a long way. Be prepared to depersonalize negative comments, which are a potential reaction to this unusual situation.

6. Encourage your students and their families to limit their media exposure. Promote positive life balance and describe how this contributes to hopefulness and resilience.

7. Be aware that some of your students/families may be at greater risk. Students and families will have different needs and require different responses. Aside from the risks you are already aware of, some may have connections to COVID-19. Previous losses may be triggered by current experiences. There are also many current losses attached to the pandemic (i.e., social events, celebrations, sports) that our students and families are experiencing. You already have experience supporting students with difficult life experiences. You are not expected to take on situations where you would otherwise ask for support outside of the classroom. Draw upon support from within your school system.

8. Be aware of students/families having a wide range of emotional responses (e.g., denial, anger, worry, sadness, confusion, and fear). Those who were already struggling, particularly our most vulnerable students and families, may have greater difficulty coping, which may in turn, increase their risk. Individuals/families will likely have greater struggles at varying points on this journey, so plan for frequent check-ins and do not be surprised when you find students/families requiring greater support at different times. Share information and seek advice if you are concerned about any of the *content* of your contact with students and parents, up to and including initiating a Violence Threat Risk Assessment. (Consider Psychological First Aid (PFA) for Schools – Teachers and Students: Listen Protect Connect Model and Teach During the World-Wide Pandemic: Click the Link <https://www.nactatr.com/files/2020NACTATR-PFA.pdf>)

9. Take a few minutes before you make a call to do a personal inventory of how you are doing. Do you have the emotional energy to make the call today? Would it be more strategic to have an additional staff member on the phone with you for this call? When you know an interaction with a parent or student is likely to require extra emotional energy, plan that conversation for when you are energized for it.

These are unprecedented times, and still **the power of human connection remains the single most important variable in mitigating and reducing the impact of trauma**. Staying connected to others will help *all* of us to move through the challenges that this pandemic presents. Please take care of yourselves as you continue to reach out to students and their families, and rely on your school and community for support.

For Complete **Script/Questions for Engaging Students (Click the Link)**

<https://www.nactatr.com/files/2020NACTATR-RCApxA.pdf>

For Complete **Script/Questions for Engaging Parents and Caregivers (Click the Link)**

<https://www.nactatr.com/files/2020NACTATR-RCApxB.pdf>

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This resource was informed by:

The evidence-informed practice of “**Psychological First Aid (PFA) for Schools – Teachers and Students: Listen-Protect-Connect Model and Teach During the World-Wide Pandemic**” - Dr. Marleen Wong, Senior Advisor, NACTATR

Click the link: <https://dworakpeck.usc.edu/academics/faculty-directory/marleen-wong>

Models of **Traumatic Event Systems (TES)** and **Violence Threat Risk Assessment (VTRA)** - Kevin Cameron, Executive Director, North American Center for Threat Assessment and Trauma Response

Click the link: <https://www.nactatr.com/> for further information