



# The Critical Role of Noncertified Educators in Trauma-Sensitive Learning Environments

Prioritizing Three Steps That Build Safe, Supportive Practices



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# Dear Reader,

I'm Jen Alexander—an experienced trauma-informed educator, author, consultant, trainer, and international speaker. I'm relentless for school change and passionate about helping you support kids, other adults, and yourself as we prioritize being safer and feeling safer together in trauma-sensitive learning environments.

If you're a noncertified educator, you engage in a critical role in our schools, yet you are too often under resourced and may feel underappreciated too. We need to change that within our educational systems so you are given the supports you need to do your job well and be cared for while you're doing it. I also want to support you in learning trauma-sensitive practices that can help you help support youth health, attendance, behavior, and learning.

Meeting the needs of every single learner—even the ones who are presenting with disruptive behaviors—is essential to ensuring everyone's access to quality education. You and your school community are likely experiencing a crisis in both behavior and learning right now. Educators are burning out and quitting in large numbers. We must ask (and answer) questions about how we can honestly acknowledge and meet these challenges in ways that are effective, using the resources we have now—all while simultaneously advocating for additional ones.

**Simply put: Kids need us, and they need one another.  
As educators, we need each other in community too.**

If you've ever felt overwhelmed by the needs in your setting or worried about the behaviors that occur at school, this guide is for you. While there is no quick fix or magic wand, there is much that will make a difference. It all starts with relationships, and we need every educator—certified and noncertified—contributing to a relationships-first culture.

**I'm ready to help you improve these skills!**

*- Jen Alexander*





# *In this guide, you'll...*

- Read what trauma-sensitivity is and why it matters
- Explore suggestions for helping yourself with your own stress responses
- Understand how to meet kids with unconditional acceptance no matter what they're feeling or doing
- Learn a safe, supportive question to add to your trauma-sensitive toolbox
- Discover how to set clear limits while putting relationships-first
- Expand your understanding of various ways you can center relationships within your role and set a goal to practice one way to improve how you're contributing to a relationships-first culture within your learning environment

## What trauma-sensitivity is and why it matters

Trauma-sensitivity is grounded in a culture where folks prioritize making learning environments safer and put relationships first. This means we care about people and pour into connections with one another, families, and kids before we address behavior or begin teaching and learning for the year, the semester, day, or the class period. This isn't to say that behavior doesn't matter or that learning isn't a priority; we simply understand that putting people, their needs, and relationships first is best for all of us as humans. In fact, it supports ambitious learning.

## Here are more reasons to put relationships first.

1. It's a way to improve school safety.
2. Relationships-first builds a caring, supportive community that benefits everyone's health.
3. This approach prevents some behavior problems because feeling safer in relationships helps everyone be less stressed and boosts recovery from stress too.
4. Again, this community culture improves teaching and learning for everyone.

Within a community of healthy relationships, we not only feel safer and are more connected, we're also better equipped to learn the skills that will help us be more resilient—such as how to help ourselves with our feelings and behavior, solve problems, or develop academic knowledge and skills.

Importantly, it takes everyone working together—in **every single job role**—to build and maintain a culture of relationships-first. In other words, it takes you!

Here are three trauma-sensitive steps you'll repeatedly need to exemplify within your noncertified role in education—no matter what that role is. I'll expand on each one and provide practical suggestions throughout the remainder of this guide.

1. Help yourself with your own stress responses by regulating the energy in your own body first (and continue doing it after that too).
2. Meet kids with unconditional acceptance no matter what they're feeling or doing.
3. Engage in safe, supportive communication practices that help youth feel safe, seen, and heard.

## Let's dive deeper into each one of these.



# *Help yourself with your own stress responses*

Everybody experiences stress, and not all stress is bad. It's when stress becomes *too much* or overwhelming that it can hurt health, behavior, relationships, and learning. As humans, we all need to work together to collectively stop overwhelming stress for one another. At the same time, youth and adults need to learn how to help themselves with their stress responses—it's not something we're born knowing how to do. This is true for kids, and it's true for you!

Help yourself with your own stress responses first so you're not taking your stress out on kids. You'll need to keep monitoring and tending to your own needs after that too. How? Explore get regulated strategies and find the ones that work for you. If you're unsure about what I mean by these strategies, know that regulation is a process of turning the energy and tension in our bodies either up or down in response to what we're experiencing in the world and within our own nervous systems so we can survive, meet our needs as best we can, and thrive.

Here are some examples of ways I've gotten regulated at school as a school counselor. When I felt stirred up from spending time in the cafeteria with many humans and of a lot of sounds or I just responded to a group of youth who were exhibiting big behaviors, I might reach out to a colleague for brief connection on my way back to my office, turn on music that would energize or settle me (and others) in my next classroom, or simply go on a brief walk by myself outside to release stress-induced energy while on my way to my next stop. There are many other healthy examples folks choose to help themselves get regulated at school—and outside of school too. You'll need multiple ones in your repertoire because what is accessible in one moment may not work in another. It takes trial-and-error to learn what works for you. Plus, you'll need practice. And... You'll benefit from support!

Here are just a few examples of things that help folks regulate.

- Tending to your own needs like getting a drink of cold water, stretching tense muscles, taking a break to engage your senses (think feeling textures that help or looking at comforting images), or taking belly breaths (if that's helpful for you; it's not helpful for everybody)
- Talking about feelings or concerns with a trusted human
- Being with someone you care about without talking about feelings or challenges—perhaps it's tapping into your sense of humor even
- Spending time in community with your people
- Connecting with a pet
- Being in nature or experiencing things or images that go with nature
- Drawing, writing, creating something, or solving something like a puzzle
- Doing something with your hands like making something, gardening, or cleaning
- Moving your body by using big muscles such as jogging, swimming, or lifting weights
- Accessing rhythms that help you—think music, dance, or other patterns that are comforting and settling or might release big energy
- Engaging in an activity or hobby that fills you
- Participating in cultural experiences or actions that go with your faith

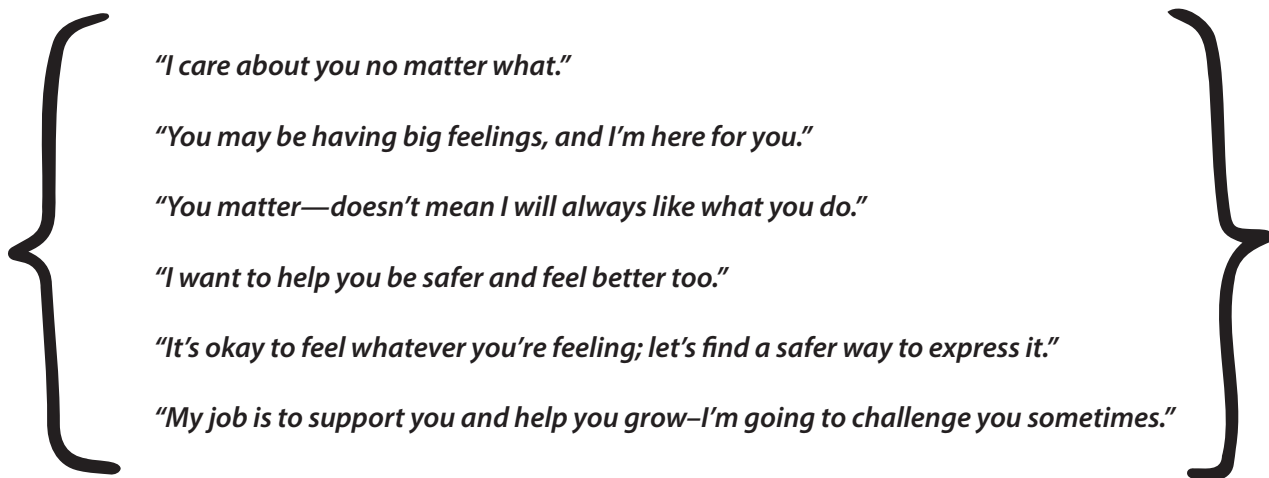


*What on that list already helps you? How could you choose that more often? Or, is there something that's not on the list that helps you get regulated instead? Be sure to focus on healthy options, not anything that can hurt yourself or anyone else—whether that's right away or over time.*

# *Meet kids with unconditional acceptance no matter what they're feeling or doing*

Meet kids with unconditional acceptance no matter what they're feeling or doing. Maybe this idea resonates with you. But if you're thinking, "Wait a minute, just because someone feels something doesn't mean it's okay to take it out on others, be unsafe, or disrupt anyone's learning in the classroom," you're not alone. You're also not wrong. **We can accept kids 100% for who they are no matter what they're feeling or doing even if we don't always like their words or actions.**

Here's what that might sound like:



It's easier to be in this place of meeting kids where they are, of course, when our own stress responses are manageable. That's why that step came before this one! Continually go back to it when needed and keep doing it after that too.

Remember, other's distressed energy doesn't necessarily have to dysregulate you. Is that harder sometimes than others? Most definitely. We're all a work in progress in this department!



# *A safe, supportive question to add to your trauma-sensitive toolbox*

Once you're tending to your own regulation needs and accepting youth no matter what, save talk about behavior, academic tasks, or any other type of learning for a bit so you can first focus on the person. We all need others' compassionate support. Here's one question that is my favorite for getting started.

Ask,  
*"Are you okay?"*

Here are a few times when you might ask this question. Always ask it in a compassionate way—never with sarcasm.

- A student isn't working, approach and say, *"Are you okay?"*
- Several kids are in a conflict and getting dysregulated while saying hurtful things, join them and say, *"Are y'all okay?"*
- One learner is getting agitated or shutting down, say, *"Hey there, are you okay?"*

When we use this question, it takes us right to the heart of the relationship. It shows that we care about the person(s) more than their actions (or inactions). Their personhood is more important in the moment than addressing their behavior, talking about expectations, or emphasizing following directions. This approach can also quickly create pause in an already escalating situation, which can help with the behavior anyway because the other human has an opportunity to feel safe, seen, and heard. It's one way we emphasize connection instead of compliance in a trauma-sensitive learning environment, which builds trust, decreases shame, and helps build a community that nurtures empathy development.

Later, we can come back to establishing clear expectations, talking about different perspectives, teaching new skills, getting the work done, or even exploring consequences and/or the need for repair. We're not avoiding this work of challenging kids to grow and meet high expectations for both learning and behavior; we're simply taking a flexible path to it. One that centers the humans in our care.

## **One important more thing...**

If behavior is unsafe, it's absolutely okay—necessary even—to set a clear limit as you meet kids with unconditional acceptance. A firm but brief, *"No, that's not okay,"* can be needed. Or maybe it's, *"Everybody needs to be safer" or "I can't let that happen; it's not safe."* We can set clear limits and communicate unconditional acceptance. Much of this comes in your tone of voice and how you say what you say. Be clear, firm when you need to be, and pair it with statements about how much you care. Never shame. Furthermore, don't emphasize punishments or rewards to control try to manipulate or control behavior either. Focus on the person and accepting them exactly as they are in the moment.



# *More ways to contribute to a relationships-first school culture...*

Here are several more ways every educator can put relationships first with all people in your learning environment—there are many more! I'll include the ideas from above so you have everything in one list.

- Devices down and eyes up as much as possible so you can greet other humans in every area of school (and outside of school too). Say words like, "Hello, it's so good to see you today. I'm glad you're here."
- Be playful with kids in a way that honors who you are. For Ms. Jen, that's using puppets with young students, but that might be different for you and the age group you work with.
- Ask folks what name (and pronouns) they prefer, practice saying their names correctly, and tell people that you want them to correct if you ever get these things wrong. Then apologize if you want to, correct your mistake, and move on.
- Get to know adults and youth by asking questions, listening to them, and paying attention to where they invest their time, energy, and passions. Use phrases, "I notice you're really into \_\_\_\_."
- Share about yourself—kids love getting to know you, and it will help you find things you have in common too. Maybe you live in the same neighborhood, are part of a shared faith community, or enjoy a similar activity.
- Communicate clearly and firmly (though not aggressively) when necessary to stop and prevent harm; also be flexible with one another.
- Care about people no matter what—this doesn't mean you always have to like what they do.
- Start interactions with, "Are you okay?" when you're concerned.
- Punishment, shame, sarcasm, or withdrawal are not how to help folks meet high expectations for learning and behavior even if it's part of how you were raised. Science teaches us there are better ways!



*What's one idea from the list (or something you've thought of instead) that you will focus on doing more often to center relationships in your learning environment?*

# Closing Words of Wisdom

One of the benefits of contributing to a relationships-first culture is that what we send out comes back 'round to us (and everyone else) in infinite ways. I'll never forget the day when I went into school carrying my own heavy personal stress. Walking from the parking lot into the building, I wondered, "Can I do this today?" Still, I entered my office and began my before-school tasks like I did every other morning." Eventually, there was a knock at the door. In came a student whom I had supported several times before. Today, however, she was bringing in a poster for my office that read, "Be kind to others." She said, "I made this for you and hoped it would help everyone who comes in to see you." While I thanked her for what she did, what she likely didn't know was how much her presence that morning impacted me. It's never children or teens' responsibility to tend to our needs as adults—yet we all need others, and sometimes the most important truths come to us from the younger ones we have the privilege of being in community with.



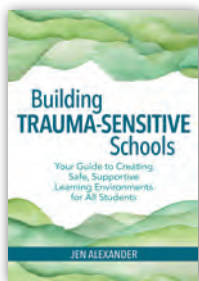
In the words of poet Emily Page Webb in her poem titled "Kindness Returned," "So often some deed of affection..." "Returns in some loving disguise." May your deeds and acts of caring compassion come back 'round to you too. I'm so glad you're part of this work.

*Take good care,  
Ms. Jen*

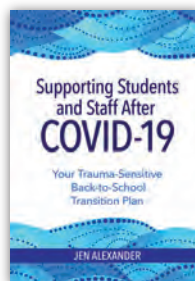
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