

Utilizing trauma-informed language in the classroom



Why language matters

The way we communicate can either create a sense of safety for students or unintentionally contribute to stress. Trauma-informed language promotes connection, respect and emotional regulation while maintaining clear expectations and accountability.



Shift from "What's wrong with you?" to "What happened to you?"

Students who have experienced trauma may respond to stress with fight, flight, freeze or shut-down behaviors. Respond with curiosity rather than judgment.

Trauma-informed language shifts

Instead of saying...

"Calm down."	"I'm here with you. Let's take a moment together."
"Stop crying."	"It's okay to have big feelings. Let's work through them."
"Why did you do that?"	"Can you help me understand what happened?"
"You're being disrespectful."	"Something seems to be making this difficult right now."
"You need to behave."	"Let's figure out what you need so you can be successful."
"If you don't stop..."	"Here's what needs to happen next."
"No."	"Here's what we can do instead."
"You're fine."	"I can see this feels really hard right now."
"You know better."	"Let's practice a different choice together."
"What's your problem?"	"How can I support you right now?"

Try saying...

Five communication strategies

1

Validate feelings

This can sound like:

- "I can see you're frustrated."
- "That sounds really overwhelming."

Validation acknowledges emotions without excusing inappropriate behavior.

2

Offer choices

Giving appropriate choices helps students regain a sense of control. This may sound like:

- "Would you like to work here or at the quiet table?"
- "Would you like to start independently or together?"

3

Focus on the behavior, not the student

Instead of labels (such as lazy, defiant or attention-seeking), describe what you observe. For example:

- "I notice your work hasn't started yet."
- "I noticed you walked away from your group."

4

Be predictable

Use consistent language:

- "Here's what will happen next."
- "Let's review today's plan."
- "I'll check back with you in five minutes."

Predictability builds safety.

5

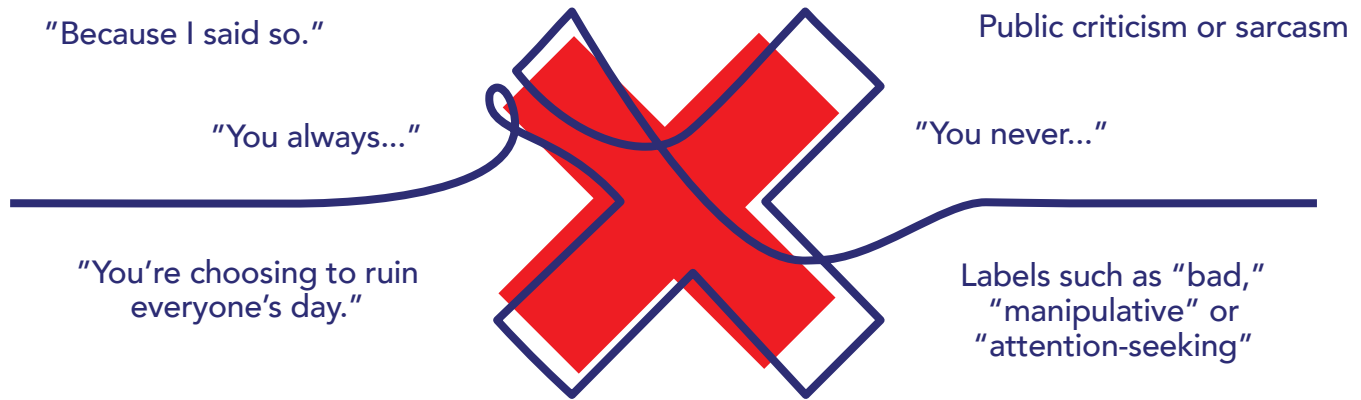
Repair the relationship

After difficult moments try saying:

- "I'm glad you're here today."
- "Tomorrow is a fresh start."
- "Thank you for working through that with me."

Students remember how adults made them feel long after they forget the conflict.

Avoid language that can escalate



Trauma-informed communication reminders

- Pause before responding.
- Connect before you correct.
- Be curious instead of critical.
- Correct with dignity.
- Assume positive intent whenever possible.

A helpful reminder

Students do well when they can. A calm, respectful and predictable adult is one of the most powerful protective factors for children who have experienced adversity.

Trauma-informed language doesn't lower expectations. It changes how we help students meet them.