



Critical Strategies For Teaching Adult Learners With Social/Emotional Disabilities and/or Trauma Backgrounds

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Objectives

Understand how trauma and social-emotional disabilities impact adult learning.

Recognize trauma responses in the classroom.

Apply trauma-informed teaching principles.

Use practical strategies that support regulation, safety, and autonomy.

Respond effectively to dysregulation.

Build resilient, empowering learning environments.

Group Agreements

No forced sharing

Respect lived experiences

Assume competence

Practice nonjudgment

Part 1-What are Social/Emotional Disabilities and Trauma Backgrounds

Common Social Emotional Disabilities in Adults (not an exhaustive list)

- ▶ Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- ▶ Social Communication Disorder
- ▶ ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) - emotional impulsivity, rejection sensitivity, difficulty with self-regulation and social interactions
- ▶ Learning disabilities with a social and emotional impact.
- ▶ Depression
- ▶ Generalized Anxiety Disorder intense fear of social interactions and negative feedback
- ▶ Bipolar Disorder difficulties with emotional regulation during depressive or manic episodes.
- ▶ PTSD
- ▶ Substance Abuse
- ▶ Attachment Disorder

How Does A Social/Emotional Disability Present?

A **social and emotional disability** affects a person's ability to:

- **Regulate emotions** (e.g., managing stress, frustration, or anxiety)
- **Form and maintain relationships** (e.g., reading social cues, communicating needs)
- **Engage in learning** due to emotional or behavioral challenges
- **Adapt to environments** that require flexibility, focus, or self-management

How Do Social and Emotional Disabilities Impact Learning?

- Difficulty with sustained attention
- Emotional flooding or shutdown
- Working-memory challenges
- Difficulty interpreting tone, social cues
- Reduced tolerance for ambiguity
- Fatigue and overwhelm
- Fear of failure or perfectionism
- Attendance instability

What is Trauma?

- Trauma is the body's response to overwhelming experiences.
- Traumatic experiences can occur at any age.
- Trauma impacts the nervous system, not just emotions.
- It affects memory, attention, motivation, and trust.

How Does Trauma Present in the Classroom?

Fight: defensiveness, irritability

Flight: avoidance, leaving the room

Freeze: zoning out, blanking, immobilization

Fawn: compliance without understanding, people-pleasing

Common Classroom Triggers for Social Emotional Learners

Feeling singled out

Sudden changes

Criticism

Public speaking

Loud voices

Power dynamics

Surprises or unpredictability

Shame or perceived failure



Part 2

Great Information-Now What Can Teachers Do To Create a Supportive Learning Environment for Students with Social Emotional and Trauma Backgrounds?

The following slides will detail some teaching practices that are vital when working with students with social-emotional disabilities.

Core Trauma Informed Teaching Principles

Safety

Trustworthiness

Choice & Autonomy

Collaboration

Empowerment

Cultural Awareness

Relationships Matter

Lead with warmth and consistency — predictable interactions help learners feel safe.

Show genuine interest — ask about students goals, strengths, and preferences.

Practice active listening — reflect feelings and validate experiences.

Offer choice and collaboration — increases empowerment and trust.

Use positive reinforcement — acknowledge effort, not just outcomes.

Be patient and nonjudgmental — dysregulation is not disrespect; it's communication.

Practical Strategies To Create Safety and Trust

1. Creating Safety

- Predictable routines
- Clear expectations
- Calm tone
- Advance notice for changes
- Quiet break areas

2. Building Trust

- Follow through consistently
- Explain the “why”
- Transparent grading or feedback
- Reliability over perfection

Instructional Strategies

Chunk information

Use multi-sensory tools

Offer previews of lessons

Repeat instructions without judgment

Draw on student's previous life experiences

Strategies for Online Instruction

Key Principles
Trauma-Informed Approach: Prioritize safety, predictability, and choice in all interactions.

- **Universal Design for Learning (UDL):** Provide multiple ways to access content and demonstrate learning.
- **Strength-Based Mindset:** Focus on abilities, progress, and autonomy rather than limitations.

Instructional Strategies

- **Clear Structure:** Use consistent routines, simple navigation, and explicit instructions.
- **Flexible Participation:** Offer asynchronous options and alternatives to speaking on camera.
- **Chunked Content:** Break lessons into small, manageable segments with visual supports.

Supportive Environment

- **Psychological Safety:** Normalize help-seeking; avoid triggering language.
- **Check-Ins & Connection:** Start with brief, optional emotional check-ins; encourage peer support.
- **Boundary-Aware Communication:** Set clear expectations for response times and availability.

Technology Tips

- Use tools that reduce cognitive load (captions, transcripts, visual organizers).
- Offer tutorials and practice spaces for tech use.

Sharing/Closing/ and Questions

- ▶ Please share something you learned in this training that you will incorporate into your classroom and why!!!
- ▶ No right or wrong answers just sharing information!
- ▶ Any questions?
- ▶ Thanks for attending.



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