

EDUCATOR EDITION

Trauma-Responsive Encounters in Schools

Seeing the Student Before the Behavior

01 The Student Who Put His Head Down

A student who is normally engaged began sleeping during first period. After several days, it would have been easy for his teacher to read the behavior as laziness or disrespect.

Instead, she quietly asked him after class, “I’ve noticed you’ve been really tired lately. Is everything okay?”

He shrugged at first. After a pause, he explained that his family had recently lost their housing, and he had been sleeping on a relative’s couch.

The teacher realized the problem wasn’t motivation. It was exhaustion.

She told him, “Thank you for telling me. Let’s figure out how we can help you get through today.”

What Presence Looked Like That Day

The teacher replaced judgment with curiosity before she ever said a word to him. She waited until after class, so he wouldn’t have to explain himself in front of everyone else.

What I Was Paying Attention To

She noticed a pattern, several tired mornings in a row, not just one bad day. She paid attention to what his exhaustion might be communicating instead of assuming it meant he didn’t care.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that trauma-responsive education asks not only what’s wrong with a student, but what that student might be carrying.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- Curiosity before correction changes what a conversation can become.
- Behavior often communicates a need a student doesn’t have words for yet.
- The most important question is sometimes the one asked quietly, after class, not in front of everyone.

Take a Moment to Reflect *What behavior in your classroom might look different if you became curious before becoming corrective?*

02 “I’m Not Doing This!”

A normally cooperative student suddenly refused an assignment, pushed his chair away, and said loudly, “I’m not doing this!”

The teacher felt the urge to confront him in front of the class. Instead, she lowered her voice. “Okay. You don’t have to explain anything right now. Why don’t you take a minute?”

Later, privately, the student revealed that the assignment had reminded him of something difficult happening at home.

The teacher still maintained her expectations. But the conversation changed from confrontation to connection.

What Presence Looked Like That Day

She regulated herself before she tried to regulate the room. Lowering her voice, instead of matching his volume, kept the moment from becoming a standoff in front of the whole class.

What I Was Paying Attention To

She noticed how far this reaction was from his normal behavior, and treated that gap as information rather than defiance. She gave him room to step away instead of demanding an explanation on the spot.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that trauma-responsive practice doesn’t eliminate accountability. It changes how we get there.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- Lowering my voice can do more than raising it ever could.
- Refusing to join someone’s escalation changes what happens next.
- Accountability and connection aren’t opposites.

Take a Moment to Reflect *What happens when the adult refuses to join the student’s escalation?*

03 “You Remembered My Game”

A mentor told a student, “Good luck Saturday. Let me know how the game goes.”

Monday morning, the mentor asked, “So, how’d you play?”

The student’s face changed. “You remembered?”

“Of course I remembered.”

The conversation lasted less than five minutes. But something important happened. The student learned this adult actually sees him.

What Presence Looked Like That Day

The mentor’s consistency, remembering something as small as a Saturday game, built trust in a way no single big gesture could have.

What I Was Paying Attention To

He paid attention to what mattered to the student himself, not just what adults usually assume should matter.

What It Taught Me

It taught me that sometimes connection begins with remembering something small.

Lessons I’m Still Learning

- Small, remembered details can carry more weight than big gestures.
- What matters to a young person isn’t always what adults expect to matter.
- Five minutes of being truly seen can change how someone shows up the rest of the week.

Take a Moment to Reflect *What seemingly small detail could communicate to a young person, “you matter enough for me to remember”?*