

Beyond Behavior:

Understanding Trauma in the Classroom



Amygdala Takeover: Under stress, the reasoning prefrontal cortex goes offline while the threat-detecting amygdala takes control.

The Four Survival Responses

Trauma-informed teaching recognizes “misbehavior” as a survival response triggered by a reactive nervous system.



Fight & Flight:

Aggression or Avoidance

Students may escalate quickly or disappear into “laziness” to protect themselves from perceived threats.



Freeze & Fawn:

Silence or People-Pleasing

Overloaded students may shut down entirely or use excessive compliance to maintain a sense of safety.

Fight Arguing, defiance, escalation

Flight/Freeze Avoidance, silence, blank stares

Core Need: Neutral tone and choices;
Reduced load and thinking time

Freeze Avoidance, silence, blank stares

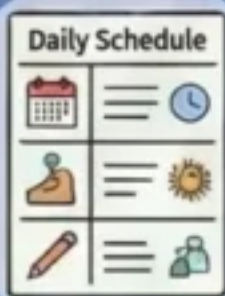
Fawn Over-apologizing, people-pleasing

Core Need: Reduced load and thinking time;
Normalized mistakes and boundaries

RESPONSE	CLASSROOM BEHAVIOR	CORE NEED
Fight	Arguing, defiance, escalation	Neutral tone and choices
Flight	Avoidance, silence, blank stares	Reduced load and thinking time
Freeze	Avoidance, silence, blank stares	Reduced load and thinking time
Fawn	Over-apologizing, people-pleasing	Normalized mistakes and boundaries

The Three Pillars of a Safe Classroom

Prioritize emotional regulation over immediate instruction to create a predictable environment where learning becomes possible.



Predictability Reduces Threat

Use posted agendas and clear routines to lower the brain's natural threat response.



Regulation Modeling

Use a neutral tone and calm posture because your nervous system sets the room's temperature.



Connection Before Correction

Greet students by name and repair conflicts privately to build the safety required for compliance.

