

WORKING WITH STUDENTS EXPOSED TO TRAUMA WHAT TRAUMA CAN LOOK LIKE IN THE CLASSROOM (AND SCHOOL)

ADAPTED FROM: HELPING TRAUMATIZED CHILDREN LEARN

CHILDREN EXPOSED TO TRAUMA STRUGGLE TO:

- Accurately perceive-safety (over perceive danger)
- Self-regulate (attention, behavior, emotion)
- Hold a self image that includes the belief that they matter
- Succeed academically and or socially at school

TRAUMA MAY:

- Disrupt the ability to process verbal information and use language to communicate. (May make it difficult to follow instructions.)
- Be less skilled in using language to forge social relationships and more skilled using language to build walls between themselves and those perceived to be dangerous or threatening.
- Have limited problem solving skills.
- Struggle with sequential ordering and therefore not be able to organize (thoughts, feelings, if-then events, multi-step tasks) which in turn results in difficulty reading, writing and with critical thinking. Interfere with a student's understanding of behavior and consequences.
- Not have internalized cause and effect relationships. This means that they cannot easily predict events, sense their power over events or make meaning of "consequences."
- Struggle to see the world from the point of view of another.
- Struggle to focus and attend to what is happening in the classroom because their brains are preoccupied with ensuring safety /warding off danger.
- Struggle to self regulate their own attention.
- Struggle to self regulate and recognize emotions. This results in poor impulse control, trouble reading social cues, and lack of a predictable sense of self. (Self regulation is a predictor of academic success)
- Have low executive functions.
- Be slow to trust adults or peers
- Struggle to engage with academic material effectively

"Students often exhibit behaviors that are a result of trauma but that can be *misinterpreted* by a teacher as willful disobedience, or that the child has greater controls over his/her behavior than he/she does. Potentially further complicating interpretation of behavior are cultural factors which may be difficult for the teacher to identify and understand."

-Teachers' Strategies Guide for Working with Children Exposed to Trauma



WORKING WITH STUDENTS EXPOSED TO TRAUMA

STUDENTS WHO DON'T PERCEIVE SAFETY (OVER PERCEIVE DANGER)

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Our brains are hard wired to keep us safe and are continually monitoring the environment for safety (out of our awareness). Children who did not have secure attachments and/or have experienced a significant threat (trauma) devote much more of their brain energy toward ensuring safety. They tend to overreact to stimuli (which are misperceived as threats) and struggle to self regulate, modulate their attention, and/or be able to complete academic tasks.

YOU MIGHT SEE:

- Inability to focus
- Deep withdrawal
- Very wary, suspicious, not trusting
- Apparently random body movements (getting out of seat) and blurting out
- Lack of impulse control
- Inability to sit still
- Repetitive behaviors
- Appear anxious (twirls hair, sucks thumb)
- Clingy/Needy
- Lack of boundaries (hugging strangers)
- Over-reaction to peer movements
- Extremely acute awareness of any negative body language
- Misinterpretation of events, where the child feels that their actions caused the problem
- Explosive behavior that does not have clear cause
- Trouble with transitions
- Trouble with any change in schedule
- Pains, body complaints, nurse visits Aggressive (physical/emotional/verbal)
- Avoidant behavior (not coming/refusing to participate or go places)

YOU MIGHT TRY:

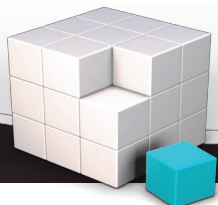
- Taking time to teach routines
- Posting schedules
- Practice transitions
- Pay attention to which parts of transitions are hard for the student and work together to create solutions. (Non verbal signals, advance warning etc.)
- Lead classroom respectfully (Kind and Firm)
- Establish clear agreements about classroom behavior with your students Teach the students how to follow them by regularly checking in with them about how they are doing and asking them to silently make improvements. ("How are we doing on our agreement to have quiet during reading? Thumbs up/sideways/down. Take a breath and notice if there is one thing you can quietly do to make it better. Please do it. Thank you")
- Warning the student of potential "surprises" including fire drills, guests, substitutes, schedule changes, new seating arrangements
- Connecting with the student each day in a similar fashion
- Small connection rituals (hand shake/high five)
- Give the student control where possible. (I'm changing the seating chart, do you have a place in the classroom that feels best for you?)
- Whole class activities involving patterns of motion
- (Regular motion/rhythm/music helps re-establish helpful connections in the lower brain.)
- Keep your mood relatively stable. If you are having a bad day explain why to the students (or they may think you are mad at them)

THINGS TO AVOID:

- Inconsistency, irregular behavior
- Allowing bullying, name calling
- Requiring students to present from the front/read aloud to all.
- Punishments or threats
- Angry outbursts in class
- Surprises (even "good" ones)
- Not keeping promises or appointments
- Not following through

CONSIDER THE CONTEXT:

- What do you know about this student's family?
- What do you know about this student's history at school?
- What do you know about his/her culture? (Unspoken rules about eye contact, personal space, gender roles, role of the individual vs. group)



WORKING WITH STUDENTS EXPOSED TO TRAUMA STUDENTS WHO ARE NOT ABLE TO SELF-REGULATE WELL (PHYSICALLY/EMOTIONALLY)

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Self-regulation is a learned behavior: early in life our brains grow neural pathways that allow us to self-regulate when we are with others who self-regulate with us. In the absence of adults who can teach us to self-regulate that part of the brain does not develop fully. Self-regulation can be learned later in life but it requires a lot of practice. The ability to self regulate is a better predictor of success than academic achievement. To be able to self regulate students must be able to recognize feelings in themselves and others, be able to connect those to their experience (and awareness of physical sensations.)

YOU MIGHT SEE:

- Over reactivity, hyper-sensitivity
- Aggressive/loud behavior
- Physical acting out
- Anticipatory aggression
- Tantrums
- Destruction
- Lack of impulse control
- Inability to sit still
- Sudden mood swings
- Dissociation/spacing out
- Irritability
- Belligerent, confrontational
- Picking fights
- Blaming
- Teasing, taunting, bullying
- Explosive behavior that does not have clear cause
- Trouble with transitions
- Pains, body complaints, nurse visits
- Aggressive (physical/emotional/verbal)
- Avoidant behavior (not coming/refusing to participate or go places)

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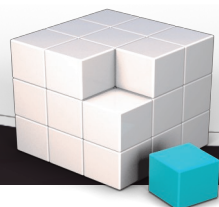
- Keep your mood relatively stable. If you are having a bad day explain why to the students (or they may think you are mad at them)
- Teach short self-regulation tools regularly. These can include deep breaths, 10 second quiet moments for reflection, listening until the chime is silent, BrainGym activities, activities that require awareness of the body in space (Moving and then asking students to close their eyes and guess something about their body like which foot is further ahead, which elbow is higher, is an example)
- Teach emotional awareness. Examples include feeling faces charts, vocabulary work to distinguish feelings, journaling, regular emotion check-ins using a consistent format.
- Lead classroom respectfully (Kind and Firm)
- Establish clear agreements about classroom behavior with your students. Teach the students how to follow them by regularly checking in with them about how they are doing and asking them to silently make improvements. ("How are we doing on our agreement to have quiet during reading? Thumbs up/sideways/down. Take a breath and notice if there is one thing you can quietly do to make it better. Please do it. Thank you")
- Warning the student of potential "surprises" including fire drills, guests, substitutes, schedule changes, new seating arrangements.
- Connecting with the student. "It seems like you feel...."
- Give the child control where possible. (I'm changing the seating chart, do you have a place in the classroom that feels best for you?)
- Whole class activities involving patterns of motion. (Regular motion/rhythm/music helps re-establish helpful connections in the lower brain.)

THINGS TO AVOID:

- Raising your voice
- Allowing bullying, name calling, outbursts
- Punishments, threats and put-downs
- Trivializing feelings/behavior

CONSIDER THE CONTEXT:

- What do you know about this student's family?
- What do you know about his/her culture? (Unspoken rules about eye contact, personal space, gender roles, role of the individual vs. group)



WORKING WITH STUDENTS EXPOSED TO TRAUMA

STUDENTS WHO DON'T BELIEVE THEY MATTER

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The belief that you matter to another human being is one of the most powerful foundations for resilience. Our beliefs about ourselves shape the way we interpret and respond to the world around us. You cannot talk a student out of their beliefs, however beliefs can change based on regular consistent behavior of the people around us. "The body changes its mind, one experience at a time." stimuli (which are misperceived as threats) and struggle to self regulate, modulate their attention, and/or be able to complete academic tasks.

YOU MIGHT SEE:

- Giving up
- Acting out when work feels hard or the student doesn't believe he/she can do it.
- Deep withdrawal
- Very wary, suspicious, not trusting
- Appear anxious (twirls hair, sucks thumb)
- Clingy/Needy
- Lack of boundaries (hugging strangers)
- Misinterpretation of events, where the child feels that their actions caused the problem
- Explosive behavior that does not have clear cause
- Trouble with transitions
- Trouble with any change in schedule
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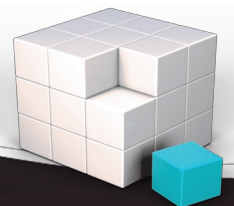
- Encouragement
- Teach the class encouragement skills
- Have appreciation circles
- Notice strengths
- Small connections regularly 2x10 rule
- Writing post it notes — that are honest
- Learning about the student. What are his/her likes/dislikes?
- Not giving up
- Saying hello, using his/her name whenever you see him/her in the hall
- Teach to make amends
- Make amends
- Use solutions instead of consequences
- If you have to call home, call home after the problem has been fixed so parents are not put in a position that they do not know how to handle
- Get to know family
- Be the magic fairy mirror
- Continue to acknowledge student even when no longer in your class
- Let the student teach you and or class something that they are skilled at
- Share appreciations (in private or with post -it note is best)
- Use teacher tools to elevate student's academic and social status with peers

THINGS TO AVOID:

- Shaming, blaming, humiliating
- Embarrassing student
- Posting grades
- Displaying poor work as "bad example"
- Requiring students to present from the front/read aloud to all
- Punishments or threats
- Not keeping promises or appointments

CONSIDER THE CONTEXT:

- What do you know about this student's family?
- What do you know about this student's history at school?
- What do you know about his/her culture? (Unspoken rules about eye contact, personal space, gender roles, role of the individual vs. group)



WORKING WITH STUDENTS EXPOSED TO TRAUMA

STUDENTS WHO DON'T SUCCEED ACADEMICALLY OR SOCIALLY

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When students misperceive safety, can't self-regulate and/or don't believe that they matter it is easy to understand why it is hard to succeed academically.

YOU MIGHT SEE:

- Inability to focus
- Lots of excuses
- Attention getting behavior
- Disruptive behavior
- Acting out in front of peers
- Withdrawal
- Lots of absences/ skipping class
- No class participation
- Inappropriate class participation
- No homework
- Low or absent organization skills
- Lack of supplies
- Sleeping in class
- Not working well alone or in group
- Not able to follow a series of instructions
- Frequent repetitive requests for help but without follow through
- Lack of ability to remember previous work/skills
- Lack of ability to make connections between linked concepts
- Making "creative" or inappropriate links between concepts.
- Shame and embarrassment with special help Refusal to accept special help.
- Claims of abilities that are not present (I can read this) Claims that work has been done and turned in. (You lost it.)
- Drug or alcohol use
- Gang involvement

YOU MIGHT TRY:

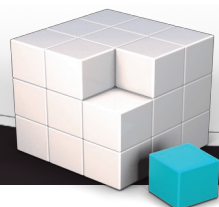
- Assess ability to self-regulate/ perception of safety/self image.
- Assess student's "prerequisite" skills. eg. Cannot succeed at algebra without number fluency.
- Develop system to augment "prerequisite" skills.
- Post schedule and homework where it is easily visible.
- Use written and verbal instructions (show the instructions on the white board and give them verbally)
- Help student set achievable goals for short term (week, every other week) learning and follow up.
- Help student notice successes. Differentiate instruction. Assist student in using other resources: including after school tutoring, local library tutoring,
- Problem solve with student
- Learn about the student's life. Many older students are working or caring for siblings and school work cannot be a priority if the family is to survive.
- Ask your support team for help. What other interventions are available at your school. (Friendship groups, grief groups, social skills groups)
- Communicate regularly with family sharing successes as well as concerns.
- Support the student in creating systems that will be helpful (organizing notebooks, homework tracking)
- Empower instead of enable.
- Make agreements and follow through.
- Listen deeply. "What is your plan?"

THINGS TO AVOID:

- Embarrassing/shaming/blaming student
- Not following through with student
- Threats
- Comparing with others
- Giving up on student
- Pointing out faults publicly

CONSIDER THE CONTEXT:

- What do you know about this student's family?
- What do you know about this student's history at school?
- What are the families ideas/experiences/values around education?
- What constitutes "success" in this student's family or culture?
- What do you know about his/her culture? (Unspoken rules about eye contact, personal space, gender roles, role of the individual vs. group)



WORKING WITH STUDENTS EXPOSED TO TRAUMA

SUMMING IT UP

THE PROBLEM IS A SOLUTION TO ANOTHER PROBLEM (Find the Belief Behind the Behavior)

STUDENTS EXPOSED TO TRAUMA MAY HAVE ALTERED BRAIN GROWTH:

- They may be missing a sense of: **Basic Trust**
 - ◆ Self-regulation
 - ◆ Ability to delay gratification
 - ◆ Causal thinking (poor if/then thinking)
 - ◆ Ability to focus or concentrate
 - ◆ Relationship skills
- Often have altered stress response

MANY CHILDREN EXPOSED TO TRAUMA HAVE:

- Decreased perception of safety (misperceive threats)
- Poor impulse control
- Decreased self regulation
- Decreased self concept
- Are withdrawn or aggressive
- Struggle with transitions

REBUILDING THE FOUNDATION OF THESE SKILLS CREATES A STABLE PLATFORM FOR ACADEMIC GROWTH:

SAFETY

- Routines
- Consistency (of routines, mood of class leader)
- Posted schedules
- Solutions instead of consequences
- Brain in the Palm of the Hand
- Self-regulation

BELONGING

- Connect before correct
- 2x10 rule
- Mirror neurons
- I messages
- Relationship/relationship/relationship

SIGNIFICANCE

- Focus on strengths
- Remember the student's story
- Understanding the brain (teach mirror neurons, Brain in the Palm of the Hand)
- "I made a mistake" vs. "I am a mistake"
- Teaching repairs, how to make amends
- Find way for student to contribute (jobs, helping)

