Working with Traumatized Children in a School Setting

The foundation for all children with trauma

The right questions to ask

1. What is driving the student’s behavior
   - What else is really going on here?
   - What does this child need?
   - How can I change my perspective?
   - What keeps me only looking at the behavior?
   - What is the behavior communicating?
   - What in the environment could be triggering the behavior?
2. What can I do at the very moment to improve my relationship with this student?
   - How can I make this relationship safe?
   - Does ______ need me to validate him/her?
   - What does _______ need from me?
   - How can I respond so the student isn’t threatened?
   - How can I physically position myself to create safety in the relationship?
   - Can the student respond to exploratory questions, not solutions I give?
   - How can I convince the student that I truly want to understand their struggle?
   - How can I be more authentic?
   - Can I stop talking and start listening?
   - Am I being sympathetic or empathetic?

Don’t forget, that the later in the school year the less stress tolerance children have, they are no different than you. The later in the year the more you need to check in with them and yourself!

When traditional motivators fail

We know that most children respond to positive and negative motivators such as sticker charts, coupons, free time, treats, suspension, raised voices, time outs, loss of something. When trauma is a primary factor in a child’s inability to regulate and calm, traditional motivators increase stress, vulnerability, and decrease control. As a result, we end up with the opposite desired reaction or response.

What can you do?

Create a sense of belonging: The class becomes the “family” that supports, validates, tolerates, and takes care of each student. When an individual is isolated, alienated, or otherwise pinpointed, the stress response system begins to fire and they may feel “not a part of the class”. When one student is dysregulated, stop and regulate everyone together.

- Acknowledge each student when they enter your classroom
- Recognize the mood, help to regulate
- LISTEN to your students, you don’t have to agree – just listen.
- Take an interest in what is important to each student
- Ask the student for help, and let them help
- Keep an attitude of “you always welcome here”
- Share a student’s ideas with others

Create a classroom designed for regulation: For students to be motivated and ready to learn, they have to be regulated. You cannot have one without the other.

- **Movement**: Repetitive motor movement can be key to helping some students regulate. This can include rocking, pacing, standing exercises, sitting exercises, movement through space, or bilateral activities.
- **Sound**: Music can be exceptionally calming and it has been shown to actually change an individual’s brain waves.
- **Animals**: Animals have a calming effect on human beings,
- **Breaks**: Some students need frequent breaks and will create behavior to leave the classroom. Provide passes that are appropriate and encourage use of an identified regulation skill.
- **Simplicity**: Decrease wall and ceiling decorations. Some students can become overwhelmed by the amount of information on a wall or ceiling.
- **Lighting**: Consider the use of warm lighting in the classroom. Stress and anxiety increase when working in intense lighting.
- **Food and Water**: If you know a student has a history of neglect, a simple drink maybe all that is necessary to regulate them.
- **Safety**: Always the number one concern. Even in the best of circumstances there are times a student, can’t regulate. Secluding a student who does not have sufficient regulation skills to calm themselves is counterproductive and will result in increasing escalation. Movement to a safe space with a trusted and regulated adult is most effective.

Develop a relationship: The most effective “tool” for motivating students. Think back to your days in school, what teacher were you most successful with? Why? Often times it has to do with the relationship you developed with that individual. A teacher-student relationship addressed two of the most primary fears that every human has; I’m not enough and I won’t be loved.

There are several small ways you can enhance this relationship:

- Leave a note on the student’s desk, especially on a tough day
- Give understanding and empathy, not sympathy
- Listen to them; Give them a voice
- Provide the support and resources they need
- Give each student personal attention
- Express an attitude of “I care about you as a person”
- Be structured and consistent
- Determine how you truly know the relationship exists, be sure the student has a voice in this

Involves parental support, not parental fear: Individuals living with trauma are already living in fear of the unknown and fear of those that can harm them. We want to empower parents and students to work together towards increasing regulation, not increasing stress by threats.

Adults need to be regulated too: We often look to the student first in a reactive or disruptive time, it is vital that we check in with our adults also. Classrooms that address the adults needs decrease overall compassion fatigue which can result in increased success.