

COUNSELLING CONNECTION: P. Knox

Traumatized Students In The Classroom

TRAUMA AND LEARNING

When a student has experienced trauma, the trauma can live in the nervous system and *drastically* impact a student's ability to self regulate and learn. Trauma can overpower the body's ability to access coping resources. This can result in a student appearing inattentive, emotionally out of control, aggressive, argumentative and unable to learn. Trauma can impact an individual's relationships, sense of self, cognition and brain function. Teachers can be proactive by accepting the impact that trauma can have on behavior, becoming aware of signals that a student is triggered, attending to classroom environment, and understanding their role in creating a trauma sensitive school.

TRAUMA IS
PROLONGUED
EXPOSURE TO A
PSYCHOLOGICAL
DISTRESSING
EVENT THAT
INVOLVES FEAR,
TERROR, AND/OR
HELPLESSNESS

PHYSICAL BODY LANGUAGE REFLECTS EMOTIONAL TRAUMA

Observing students' body language can be valuable. It is helpful to adopt a curious stance towards student nonverbal and verbal behavior. Disruptive behaviors might be serving a purpose for a child. Ask yourself if the behavior could be related to the body's stress response of flight/fight, or freeze. Traumatized children need skills to self regulate. They are often in a state of hyper or hypo arousal, which does not allow for the learning part of the brain to function. These students are focused on protecting themselves and managing feelings of fear and abandonment. There is always a reason to behavior. **ASK WHY?** If a traumatized child faced rejection at recess and is in a classroom setting where higher order brain is required, this can be problematic. The list below recognizes common labeled behaviors that could be reflective of a child's natural stress response when dysregulated.



FIGHT

- Argumentative
- Oppositional
- Stubborn
- Challenging Authority
- Aggressive

FLIGHT

- Distracted
- Takes off
- Hyper
- Attention Seeking
- Hider

FREEZE

- Lazy
- Daydreamer
- Careless
- Unmotivated
- Unresponsive
- Passive

FOR LEARNING TO HAPPEN, STUDENTS MUST FEEL SAFE, CONNECTED AND REGULATED. YOU CAN:

- Identify students who are at risk.
- Be cautious of proximity when speaking to students one on one.
- Seat students where they can see the door.
- Reduce clutter/clear paths in classroom.
- Avoid use of touch (this could be a trigger).
- Recognize that trust must be built (traumatized children might have learned that “safe people” can be dangerous).
- Communicate *upcoming* changes in routine or schedule.
- Collaborate with school team about how staff promotes positive relationships with students (Office, Support Staff, Admin, Teachers).
- Communicate verbally and nonverbally that you respect students.
- Look for a way you can connect with every student.
- Validate emotions behind disruptive/concerning behaviors.
- Use a comfortable tone of voice (loud voice could be trigger).
- Model curiosity and empathy (Behavior is reflection of emotional language).
- Praise student whenever you can.
- Offer choices when appropriate (creates sense of empowerment).
- View misbehaviors as lack of skill rather than intentional button pushing.
- Discipline in private using a calm/controlled tone. (Think about limit setting vs punishment).
- Reflect upon how you are seen in eyes of students/What students might feel when they enter your class (Look through their lens).
- Look for signs of dysregulation, be proactive!
- Ask yourself if the student is tired, hungry, lonely, angry.
- Allow for breaks/quiet time.
- Display clear guidelines/procedures/schedules.
- Regular time to deep breathe/mindfulness and grounding activities (for you too).
- Provide quotes in room that promote growth mindset/grit, unconditional acceptance.
- View the following video:

https://www.ted.com/talks/nadine_burke_harris_how_childhood_trauma_affects_health_across_a_lifetime?language=en

Students need us to be with them, to feel safe, and know that we care for them unconditionally. Defiant behaviors and power struggles can be reduced if we can bring ourselves to ask what the child is communicating and why the behavior is happening.

“When we are stressed, we regress.” Juli Alvarado

Article References

- Alexander, J. (2017). *Association for Treatment and Training in the Attachment of Children (ATTACH)*.
Statman-Weil, K. (2015, May). *Creating trauma sensitive classrooms*. Retrieved from :
https://www.naeyc.org/system/files/YC0515_Trauma-Sensitive_Classrooms_Statman-Weil.pdf