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National Workforce Centre
for Child Mental Health

Trauma sensitive behaviour management



Exposure to stressful events and trauma can result in children being unable to control their emotions and behaviour. Being able to see that the child's behaviour is a consequence of their physiological and emotional responses to the event – rather than perceiving it as malicious – can make it easier to be patient and calm. Modelling the behaviours that you would like the child to display is important and at times very difficult.

Younger children may play out the distressing event(s) repeatedly. Traumatic play is often a non-verbal way of trying to understand the event and to make sense of it. Sometimes a child loses the ability to play in any other way; this is an indication that the child needs further assistance. Creative play is vital for development. Children who are 'stuck' with the same play routine soon lose friends who become bored with the repetition, and this further alienates the child.

Ten tips for creating a trauma-sensitive classroom:

1. Create a safe classroom and school environment

A safe classroom environment is one that is predictable, organised and that has clearly stated, reasonable expectations. Established routines that are explained, easy to follow and kept to are reassuring and allow children to negotiate their day of learning with confidence.

Beginning each day with the timetable written on the board and talking students through the tasks and processes will set out the goals of the day and allow for a sense of achievement at their completion. A visual or pictorial timetable is especially helpful for those who are having difficulties with processing language.

Changes to the plan can and will happen, but it would be useful to call together the group and explain in advance what will change and why. Traumatized children do not like unexpected surprises or sudden changes, it makes knowing what to expect in the day a priority. Transitions can be especially difficult and need a lot of explicit preparation.

2. Help children to regulate their emotions so that they can learn

In addition to having a calm classroom, teaching children strategies to self-calm is useful and conducive to creating a positive learning atmosphere. Sometimes to get calmness there needs to be opportunity for movement and the expenditure of energy first. Children who are in a state of constant hyper-arousal may find that a game that allows for running around or even being able to get out of their seat and hand out sheets for a class task allows them to resettle. Please note: make sure the game isn't startling and that children are aware of the rules and know what to expect.

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After each burst of activity, an opportunity to take some calming breaths, relax and consciously prepare for learning is a way to teach children to develop a productive state of mind and to take control of emotions. Assisting children to name and talk about feelings, having resources around the classroom that provide words for feelings and emotions and cueing students into their feelings are all strategies that develop emotional literacy and help children to understand their own and others feelings. If a child is highly emotional it is important to first let them calm down before helping them to identify their feelings. If children are very distressed they may need gentle assistance to help them calm down.

3. Believe that the child can achieve academic success

The temptation to expect less from children after a traumatic event is common. Although the capacity for concentration may be impaired it can be redeveloped through good teaching strategies, support and time. Make all expectations clear, break tasks down to subsets and provide supportive and clear feedback during and after each subtask to monitor that the child is on task and has understood the task correctly. Scaffold the task and the skills required to achieve learning. Acknowledge successes and provide explicit feedback on what has been achieved.

4. Restore a sense of control and personal efficacy

Provide a place to calm down such as a 'peaceful corner', where children can regain emotional control safely or remove themselves to a quiet space to regain composure and reduce stimulation. Sometimes having music or a jigsaw puzzle or even plasticine where agitated hands can work the plasticine are calming activities. For older students, calming activities on a tablet, drawing or a game of basketball are all strategies that students have found useful.

5. Build strengths and capacity

Take opportunities to remind students of their strengths. Planning actions and activities brings a measure of control and a sense of personal achievement to day-to-day life. Provide students with opportunities for informed choices, beginning with a limited range of options and building capacity for decision making and self-efficacy.

Every child has strengths. Identify the strengths and allow the child to experience success. Take the opportunity to show the child that they can generalise the skills from that success to other areas of their learning and life. Sometimes they will need help to make the connections and generalise the skills.



6. Understand the connection between emotion and behaviour

A child that has difficulty regulating emotion is frequently impulsive and challenging. The program of 'Stop, Think, Do' is a good mantra for teachers of trauma affected students. Stop and think about where this behaviour is coming from, was it evident before the event? Respond calmly and clearly. These children must be accountable for their behaviour but require teaching, reminders, clear boundaries and expectations that are stated in a variety of modalities and applied consistently. Respond to the underlying emotions rather than the behaviour.

7. Be hopeful and optimistic

Many children experience a loss of trust in the world after the events – they believe that because a terrifying thing has happened, they can no longer dare to hope that life can be happy and safe again.

Modelling optimism and encouraging them to see the strengths and coping skills they have and are using will engender a sense of personal efficacy and hope. It is not uncommon for traumatised children to have a foreshortened sense of the future, believing that they will die early and continue to struggle in life. Reminding them of their strengths and providing opportunities for setting goals and achieving them will help them to take a positive view of their lives. Remember, optimism can be taught, and that it is contagious.

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8. Use a variety of teaching and learning strategies that allow for repetition, reinforcement and different learning modalities

Use multiple ways of presenting instructions, allow the children to repeat the instructions or to brief their neighbour on the task, to reinforce what is required. Using both written and auditory presentations will minimise the likelihood of children feeling unable to process the information and becoming overwhelmed or disengaged. If a student does 'lose track' of the task, a written summary will allow them to check back and re-engage.

Rehearsing new learning, vocabulary and concepts will also be helpful. Putting information in context will facilitate the child being able to sequence the information and to continue to build each concept upon the previous, leading to coherent knowledge and learning. For some children who are struggling with impaired learning capacity after a traumatic event, school is one big closed activity, with the gaps being out of context and unfillable. They will benefit from being able to be cued in to where to find the information.

9. Engagement, social connection and trusting relationships that are built on respect and positive regard

Being part of a social group is protective and can help people overcome adverse events. After traumatic events, communities and school communities can be changed, with some people leaving the area where their supports were.

School provides a community of care for children and it is through the relationships that children have with friends and teachers that they can begin to recover from and make sense of the events.

Some students (and staff) come to school for normality. They don't want to have to talk about the event and their impact but would rather have a normal school day of learning and play. Being sad and dealing with the emotions and consequences of the event takes a lot of energy and head space. Not talking about the event doesn't mean that the child isn't thinking about them or is being unusually avoidant. It just may be that they do not want to be identified as a victim in every sphere of their lives. It's okay to ask the student quietly what their preference is.

For some students, their teacher is an adult in whom they can confide and ask difficult questions. Many children express the view that they don't want to upset their parents or further stress them by asking questions or saying that they are struggling. This is when a trusted relationship with an adult at school will allow the child to gain the help and support they need.

10. Look after your own emotional needs

Many of the staff in schools have had direct experience of the event themselves and are experiencing a similar range of reactions and stressors as the children in their class. This can make it difficult to focus on the needs of the child. As adults, we have a wider range of coping skills than are available to children and know that we can survive adversity. Children often haven't learnt yet that they too have these coping capacities.

Even if you are not personally affected by the event, working with traumatised children is challenging and by hearing the stories of fear and despair you may become vicariously traumatised.

This resource was written by Michelle Roberts, with updates from Nicola Palfrey in June 2018. Michelle Roberts is an educator and psychologist with over 20 years of experience in child disaster psychosocial recovery. Nicola Palfrey is a clinical psychologist and Director of the Australian Child & Adolescent Trauma, Loss & Grief Network (ACATLGN).

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