

Breaking the Cycle of Trauma Resiliency in the Trauma Informed Classroom

"Study after study shows that the single strongest predictor of a resilient outcome is a positive, lasting relationship with a supportive adult." (ARC Framework, 2017)

- A primary goal is to prevent re-injury or re-traumatization by acknowledging trauma and its triggers, and avoiding stigmatizing and punishing students.
- Shifting the mindset from "What is wrong with you?" to "What happened to you?"

1. Always Empower, Never Disempower: Avoid power struggles with students. Students who have experienced trauma often seek to control their environment to protect themselves, and their behavior will generally deteriorate when they feel more helpless. Classroom discipline is necessary, but should be done in a way that is respectful, consistent, and non-violent.

2. Provide Unconditional Positive Regard: As consistently caring adults, school staff has the opportunity to help students build trust and form constructive relationships. For example, if a student tells you, "I hate you! You're mean!", respond with unconditional positive regard and acceptance of their feelings. You might say, "I'm sorry you feel that way. I care about you and hope you'll get your work done."

3. Maintain High Expectations: Set and enforce limits in a consistent way. Maintain the same high expectations of a student who has experienced trauma as you do for his/her peers.

4. Check Assumptions, Observe, and Question: Trauma can affect any student and can manifest in many different ways. Realize when you are making assumptions, and instead, talk with the student and ask questions. Make observations about the student's behaviors and be fully engaged in listening to his/her response.

5. Be a Relationship Coach: Help students from preschool through high school develop social skills and support positive relationships between children and their caregivers.

6. Provide Guided Opportunities for Helpful Participation: Model, foster, and support ongoing peer "helping" interactions (e.g., peer tutoring, support groups).

7. Take care of yourself: Exposure to others' trauma can lead to vicarious trauma and compassion fatigue. Identify self-care activities that help you relieve stress (e.g., physical exercise, creative outlets, getting adequate rest). By taking care of yourself first, you will be in a better position to help others while avoiding burnout.

8. Empower students by offering choices and praising positive choices: Avoid power struggles with students by offering choices for participation and encouraging their sense of agency and control over their lives. When students make positive choices, praise them on a job well done.

9. Check in with students: Never underestimate the difference you can make by genuinely asking “*what’s going on?*”. This simple question can open up a dialogue and provide you with information you need to better understand and meet students’ needs. Let the student know that you care and the school cares.

10. Use non-verbal strategies: Students who have experienced trauma often pay more attention to nonverbal cues than verbal communication, so using multiple forms of communicating information and helping students identify and verbally express their feelings are important strategies to support learning.

11. Create Opportunities to be Successful: In the day-to-day work of teaching, it can be far too easy to focus on the negatives, but it’s important to give kids moments of success. “Catch students being good and create opportunities for them to do the right thing.” Positive experiences beget positive experiences and those moments make kids feel valued and valuable.

12. Create spaces for students to go to calm down: When students are triggered, the “learning brain” (prefrontal cortex) goes offline. Verbal warnings or rational arguments that make demands on these higher functions may escalate the situation, as the student is physiologically unable to access these functions when triggered. Students in a triggered state need help to calm down from the “there and then” triggers to become more present in the “here and now” reality.

13. Encourage students to identify and regulate their emotions: Being able to identify and name our emotions gives us a certain mastery over them. The more we understand our emotions the more ability we have to notice and regulate them.

References

ARC Framework – Attachment, Regulation and Competency. (2017). Retrieved December 4, 2017, from <http://arcframework.org/>

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