

Safe Signals for Preschoolers

Trauma-responsive schools build safe, nurturing relationships with children rather than focusing on exclusionary discipline

BY BARBARA SORRELS



For decades, the achievement gap in American schools has been attributed to the ill effects of children living in poverty. Advancements in neuroscience have provided new insights on this ongoing challenge, indicating that the issue is much bigger than poverty alone—it is a trauma gap. Maltreatment and trauma result in a failure of brain development in attachment, regulatory, sensory processing, affiliation, and cognitive systems. The cumulative failure of these systems compromises children’s capacity to learn in group settings.

Even seasoned teachers are reporting that this school year has been the toughest and most traumatic of their careers. Pre-K children show up in classrooms lacking the foundational skills required to function in a group setting due to the stress and chaos their families have endured. The good news is that the repair and recovery of these developmental systems is possible when teachers are knowledgeable about child development, neuroscience, and trauma-responsive practices.

A SENSE OF SAFETY

The human brain and body are a surveillance system; they constantly scan the environment for people, events, or things that are a potential threat to the individual’s well-being. Children must feel safe emotionally and physically to be able to learn. This is especially true for 4-year-olds, because pre-K is often their first experience with formal education, and it will lay the foundation for years to come.

Safety is found in a relationship with the teacher. The child must sense that the teacher is psychologically and physically “big enough” to take care of them. This means that the teacher must be fully present and mindful of how to send “signals of safety” through soft eyes, safe touch, pleasant facial expressions, relaxed posture, and a safe and a soothing tone of voice. Limits are reinforced consistently in a kind but firm

manner, which helps children feel safe and secure.

A safe classroom is one with a predictable schedule and consistent routines. The brain mistrusts uncertainty. Providing a visual schedule of the day’s events allows children to know what comes next and relieves anxiety. Established routines support children’s self-direction and self-regulation.

The daily schedule is arranged to minimize the number of transitions. A transition is like a loss because it requires a “letting go” of something in the present moment to embrace something in the future—though it might only be moments away. Children who have experienced profound losses early in life due to maltreatment and trauma perceive even small losses as overwhelming. They also are prone to rigid thinking, and transitions tax their capacity to be flexible. Teachers can support those who struggle by alerting children



to impending transitions and giving specific instructions about what they will need to do. Adults must be close by for coaching and support—not for punishment when the child struggles to manage.

THE POWER OF RELATIONSHIPS

As children return to the classroom after many months of disrupted and inconsistent academic instruction, it's tempting to focus on "catching them up." But a single-minded focus on academics will ultimately fail because a teacher's ability to influence the learning and behavior of a child is directly proportional to the strength of the emotional connection.

Establishing trusting relationships with children will open their hearts and minds to learning. Maltreatment and trauma squelch curiosity, because children perceive the world as unsafe. Curiosity is fuel for learning. When curiosity is extinguished, learning stops. A trusting relationship with the teacher gives the child courage to be curious and explore the world.

Connections with children can be forged by being an astute observer. We learn to read their cues and discern their interests, talents, and needs. Trauma-responsive teachers respond to children in ways that communicate "I hear you, I see you, and I understand you."

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SOOTHING ENVIRONMENTS

Maltreatment and trauma cause children to live in a hyper- or hypovigilant state; they are either mobilized for action (fight or flight), or they are withdrawn and shut down. Those who live in a chronically vigilant state struggle with such things as focusing attention, impulse control, and modulation of the intensity, volume, and speed of behavior. Other children disengage from the environment and internalize their distress by being withdrawn, overly compliant, and "checked out."

Trauma-responsive teachers are aware of children's states of arousal and help them maintain a state of calm alertness that is conducive to learning. Adults can teach emotional vocabulary and help children learn to identify their own emotional states, integrating deep-breathing strategies, yoga, mindfulness, tapping, and other regulating activities throughout the curriculum.

The work of Bruce Perry, renowned child trauma expert, focuses on the power of rhythm to soothe and regulate children. Rhythmic games such as the Hokey Pokey, Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush, and London Bridge are a regular part of the day, alongside songs, fingerplays, and rhythm instruments.

Most importantly, trauma-responsive adults are able to share their calm. Emotions are contagious, and safe adults have the self-awareness and regulatory capacity to appropriately manage their own internal state and not react in anger and frustration to the behavioral challenges of children. The adult accepts big emotions and challenging behaviors, and the child learns regulating strategies.

DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE

Trauma-responsive pre-K classrooms are play-based environments that offer developmentally appropriate practice informed by developmental milestones, individual capacities, and cultural sensitivity. Play disarms fear and is neurodevelopmentally healing, according to researchers Richard L. Gaskill and Bruce D. Perry.

Children with a history of trauma typically function at half of their chronological age. Play-based environments allow children at many different developmental levels to engage with materials in a manner that is conducive to and supportive of their individual capacity and understanding. Rich, intriguing materials beckon children to explore, experiment, and pursue topics and interests that ignite their curiosity.

RESPONDING TO BEHAVIOR

Trauma often shows up in the classroom as externalizing or internalizing behavior that gets labeled as “challenging.” Maltreatment and trauma cause children to live in a chronic state of fear that results in self-protective strategies. We often refer to maladaptive behavior as “acting out”—and children do indeed “act out” when they don’t have the words to describe what they are feeling. Trauma-responsive teachers recognize that behavior is a form of communication, and they seek to understand.

Traditional approaches to discipline focus on assigning a negative consequence to an undesirable behavior. Timeouts, taking away recess, and other forms of punishment are common strategies to make children “pay” for their transgressions. The ability to change behavior is believed to come from power and control, reward and punishment, and coercion and threat.

Trauma-responsive educators instead embrace a relational approach to guidance and the belief that children have an internal drive to please those who care for and protect them. The power to influence a child’s behavior in positive ways is derived from the strength of the relationship.

Children learn new behaviors in the same way they learn new skills—through modeling, guided practice, independent practice, and repetition. In a trauma-sensitive environment, they are given the opportunity to practice appropriate behaviors through “do-overs” or “reboots”—a reasonable and effective alternative to the timeout. Instead of telling a child to go sit alone and think of a better way to behave, the teacher supports and coaches the child in practicing the appropriate behavior in the moment. When children “do it over,” new neural pathways are formed, and new ways of behaving are internalized over time with repetition. Other ways of practicing appropriate behavior are through role-playing, puppet practice, scripted stories, and behavioral rehearsals.

VOICE AND AUTHORITY

Trauma robs children of their voice and renders them powerless. For this reason, many will fight to stay in control and resist the authority of teachers and other adults. They can do this in both overt and subtle ways—through aggression, nonstop talking, selective mutism, disrupting group time, or being bossy in play. Sharing power with children is important. We can do this by ignoring the “no” and giving two yeses.

As an example, once when I was collecting rhythm sticks in our therapeutic preschool, one boy put the rhythm sticks behind his back and said, “No, they are mine.” I ignored his opposition and gave him two choices. “Would you like to put them in my left hand or in my right hand?” He immediately complied and placed them in my

Core Concepts: Trauma-Responsive Education

- Maltreatment and trauma thwart brain development in multiple areas, compromising children’s capacity to learn.
- Children—especially trauma-impacted children—must feel they are in a safe environment to learn effectively, with present and mindful teachers and reliable routines.
- Instead of traditional exclusionary discipline, educators should employ a relational approach to guide and influence child behavior in positive ways.
- Sharing power with choices, negotiation, and problem-solving helps children take part in solutions, giving them a voice in the learning experience.

left hand. Giving him a little bit of power averted a power struggle. We share power by offering choices, negotiating, and problem-solving. Staying focused on solutions rather than punishment gives children a voice and allows them to share their thoughts and ideas. It is possible for teachers to remain in control without being controlling.

It is in everyday acts of kindness and unconditional positive regard on the part of invested adults that children find healing. They might not always remember what we teach them, but they will always remember how we made them feel. ●

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The Coalition to Support Grieving Students offers training resources to help educators better care for students who are suffering from loss and trauma, including a COVID-19 pandemic toolkit. Visit grievingstudents.org for information.