



Trauma-Informed Classroom Strategies



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Relationship Based Strategies

“Change for these children will come more easily if the focus is on the relationship, rather than on behaviour management strategies” (Child Safety Commissioner, 2007, p. 18)

Having a warm, healthy relationship with an adult can be healing for children who have experienced trauma. These relationships provide safety and grounding. Fostering these types of relationships in the classroom can create safety for all students. Strategies fostering these relationships are outlined below.

CAPPD

This acronym provides a guideline of trauma informed relationship building. It was created by the Health Federation of Philadelphia, see references for more information.

Calm

- The goal is to create a relaxed, focused state for yourself and your students. Learning to regulate emotions and return to a relaxed state after being alarmed or triggered helps children function in the neocortex, which is responsible for complex thinking and learning.

Attuned

- Be aware of children’s non-verbal cues including body language, tone of voice, and emotional state. These cues indicate how much and what types of activities and learning the child can manage. You must connect with a child on an emotional, sensory level before moving to a cognitive level.

Present

- Be in the moment and focus your attention on the child. All children can tell when people are not truly engaged or paying attention to them.

Predictable

- Provide children with routine, structure, and repeated positive experiences. This will help children to feel safe and allow them to be free to grow and explore.

Don't

- Let children's emotions escalate your own. Remain in control of your own emotions and the expression of them. The best way for children to learn to regulate their emotions is by watching us regulate ours.

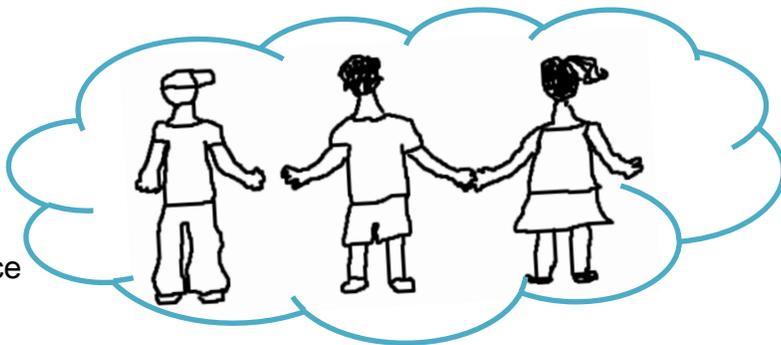
(Health Federation of Philadelphia, 2010)

Fostering Relationships

By connecting with students in a compassionate and understanding way, teachers can plant the seed for strong relationships to form. These relationships are integral in providing the safety children need in order to learn and grow at school.

Provide Unconditional Positive Regard

- Show genuine respect for students as persons.
- Provide kindness and empathize with the challenges students experience at home and school.
- Recognize the healing power of an adult who cares.
- Be a "Turn-around teacher" by consistently acting and responding with positive regard.



Be Understanding

- Get to know the child's history and understand where behaviours are coming from. This understanding can increase empathy for the teacher and let the child know they are understood and valued.

Get Down on Eye Level

- When interacting or talking to children, get down on eye level and make regular eye contact.

- Being on the same physical level as children can help them feel safe, more in control and connected.

Always Empower, Never Disempower

- Children may compete with their teachers for power because they believe that they can achieve safety by controlling their environment.
- Teachers are in positions of power and authority.
- Attempts at control over traumatized students are often counterproductive.
- When possible, avoid battles for control.
- Hold students accountable.

Maintain Connection

- Try to maintain a connection even if a child is distracted, acting out, or withdrawn.
- If you notice a child dissociating, try using gentle attempts to connect with them. You can say a word, “Hi” or try to gain eye contact. Ask for permission to make eye contact before engaging.

Be Nurturing

- Be fully present in your interactions.
- Validate their feelings.
- Provide comfort and physical affection when sought.
- Laugh and play games.
- Provide safe mental, physical, and social challenges.

Communicate Respect and Transparency

- Be open and honest with children. Don't hide information from them or avoid their questions.
- Be respectful in your tone, words, and body language.

- This helps promote effective communication and promotes children's sense of identity and self-worth. These experiences will help children learn to regulate their emotions and behaviours.

Foster Relationship with Caregivers

- Talk to caregivers and ask what works at home as well as what doesn't work.
- Understand parents may have trauma histories, stay calm and regulated as you would with the child.
- Acknowledge positive aspect of child to parents.

(Child Safety Commissioner, 2007; Health Federation of Philadelphia, 2010; The State of Washington, 2011)

Structure & Consistency

Providing emotional consistency and clear interpersonal boundaries signals safety for children who have experienced trauma.

Be Predictable

- Providing structure & consistency in your own responses will help children regulate as their own internal structure for regulation may not be available.
- Keep regular routines, warn of disruption to routines, and give time and supervision for transitions.

Maintain High Expectations

- Provide consistent expectations, limits, and routines.
- Limits are most useful when they are immediate, related, age-appropriate, proportional, and delivered to the child in a calm and respectful voice.
- When setting limits, name the inappropriate behaviours and follow through with consequences.

Give Choices and Control

- Misbehaving is a way for children to have control. Give back control by giving choices.
- “You can finish that work standing up or sitting down”.
- “Do you want to wear your coat or carry it to the playground?”

(Child Safety Commissioner, 2007; Health Federation of Philadelphia, 2010; The Australian Childhood Foundation, 2010)

Check in With Yourself

Take time to check in with yourself and note your own feelings, assumptions, triggers, and needs. Relationship based work such as teaching may be supported by understanding of your own needs, using supports, and practicing self-care.

Check Assumptions, Observe, and Question

- Identify your assumptions about students, trauma, and how best to work with students impacted by trauma, and then choose to make an observation instead.
- Based on those observations, ask questions.
- Example: *Assumption* – I need to show who is boss in this classroom. *Observation* – Sarah gets disruptive whenever I set boundaries and I get frustrated and send her out. *Question* – How best do I maintain control of the class without triggering students?
- It may be helpful to record your observations to help remove emotionally charged reactions.

Remain Neutral

- Children with trauma may try to arouse aggression in adults as it is much more familiar to them than calm relationships. Remain calm when this happens, avoid power struggles.
- Reflect on your own emotions when this is happening, ask yourself what *you* need, it may be control, space, support, or all of the above. Take a step back – if you need to step away from the child do so and then go back.

Maintain Teacher Role

- Because of the intensity of trauma-informed relationships, it is normal for teachers to fantasize about taking a certain child home with them to parent, and children may in fact ask teachers to do this.
- Make time to talk to someone about this in order to maintain effective as your primary role as teacher as well as to avoid burn out

(Child Safety Commissioner, 2007; The State of Washington, 2011)

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Classroom and Teaching Strategies

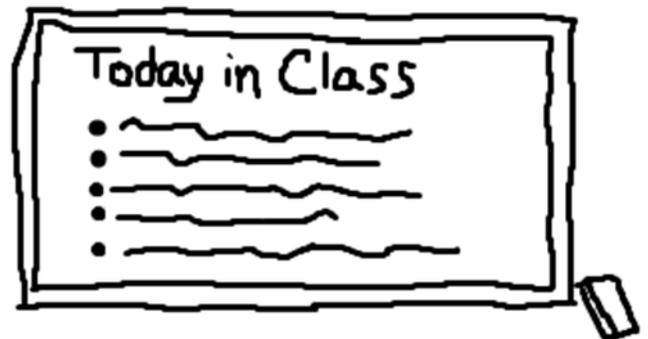
“The two primary jobs of a child are to learn and have fun.” (Ziegler, D, Jasper Mountain)

Trauma-informed teaching strategies can build safety in the classroom through consistency, structure, compassion, and understanding. New learning cannot take place if a child does not feel safe. By ensuring safety in the classroom, all students benefit from a safe and compassionate space needed to take emotional and intellectual risks when learning.

Create Physical and Emotional Safety

Physical Safety

- Be aware of personal space.
- Provide appropriate physical touch when a child seeks it.
- Ask permission before any physical contact.
- Giving unwanted or asked for affection can re-traumatize or trigger a child.
- Physical comfort can help calm children and help them learn to regulate their emotions.



Emotional Safety

- Designate time and space for child living with trauma to talk about it if they wish so the child knows it's ok to talk about what is happening for them.
- Recognize environmental triggers: weather, anniversaries of loss or trauma.
- Prepare for difficulties, for example if a child does not like to be alone, provide a buddy to go with them to the washroom.
- Support religious beliefs. If trauma is attributed to higher power let child have their own beliefs, refer to someone of this belief if needed.

- Monitor children - children are very honest. Kids with trauma are often very sensitive to teasing/bullying and can feel unsafe. Act as a buffer, and let the child know they are being watched out for.

(Health Federation of Philadelphia, 2010, Ziegler, D.)

Structure and Consistency

Triggers may be managed by maintaining classroom structure and consistency as the classroom becomes a more predictable space. Alert children to any changes in the classroom to provide the students time to adjust.

Classroom Routine

- Check-in at the start of each week and term: “What do you remember from last week? What stands out? Why? What would you like to be the same this week? What would you like to be different?”
- Predictable structure. Structure provides sense of safety, signals to child he/she is safe. Avoid overly rigid environments, try finding a balance.
- Discuss future activities which will take place in the next lesson, tomorrow, next week, etc.
- Establish a routine to create consistency and predictability.
- Do things at the same time and in the same way as often as possible.
- Inform children of any changes – explain how and why things will change.
- Inform students if the room or other elements of their environment is being changed or moved around.
- Stability helps children regain a sense of trust and control in their lives. It also reassures them that an adult is in charge and will help to keep them safe.
- Safety and stability are necessary for children to be able to function from the neocortex.

Monday Mornings, Daily Schedules, and Class Meetings

- Take time to outline the day.
- Use symbols and pictures of clocks for young children.

- Consider holding a brief class meeting – students can be asked to share about their weekend.
- Some teachers ask for “celebrations or challenges” (not all students will share challenges because they may not feel it is safe to do so).
- Student participation should be by choice.
- For safety, seat children in a circle so no one has their back to anyone else.
- Review rules and agreements during class meetings to provide safety.
- If you notice a change in a student’s affect, take time to connect with that student (may be later in the day or in private).
- Offer choices.

Provide Visuals

- Display a visual or pictorial class timetable. You may want to include pictures of students doing the tasks.
- Set up a shadow board outlining what students will need for each lesson or subject.
- Position clocks in view in the classroom and refer to them with cues, such as “We are half way through reading, when the big hand is on the 10 we will have recess.” This can encourage students to stay on task as they can visualize progress and an end point.

Transitions

- Provide structured play opportunities during breaks that build on social skills, team work, or sharing.
- Utilize buddy programs to help students manage change with some support.
- Prepare and engage peers to support specific students through transitions periods.

(The Australian Childhood Federation, 2010; The National Traumatic Stress Network, 2008; The State of Washington, 2011, Ziegler, D.)

Discipline

Discipline may bring up many difficult and intense emotions for children who have experienced trauma, and these children may react to discipline in a variety of ways. In order to set boundaries and maintain expectations, use discipline as a way of showing children what type of behaviours are safe to express while in school, while also giving them the opportunity to try learn new behaviours.

Consequences Rather Than Punishment

- Follow inappropriate behaviour with natural consequences that are in relationship to the behaviour rather than punishments which are not related.
- Example: “Instead of going outside for recess, I want you to stay with me and we will put back the books that were spilled on the floor”.
- Understand misbehaving as attention seeking behaviour – so give the attention rather than punish it. Once attention is given the child will most likely move on.
- If possible, give choices for consequences.
- A behaviour modification program (ie. stickers) is often not effective for children affected by trauma.

Setting Limits

- Children with trauma may have difficulty with accepting limits around inappropriate behaviour because of intense shame and/or re-enacting trauma patterns.
- If there is a problem try “I see you’re having trouble moving that chair”.
- Give space for child to try again, if unable to finish/focus: “Since it took longer to finish cleaning the table, we have run out of computer time”.
- Use direct, specific, and positive language for verbal and written rules and directions. Instead of saying, “Stop being hyperactive”, say “Please walk quietly and calmly in the hallway.”

“Time In”

- Time out can replicate rejection, reinforcing a child’s shame, belief they are unlovable.
- Instead of taking the student out, ask them to join you, or sit next to you. If the rest of class is participating in an activity, talk to the child about how fun it could be to join them, ask what they need to do that.

Provide Help, Not Warnings

- If a child is upset and/or angry, something has triggered intense feelings such as shame, sadness, or fear. Recognize this reaction is not toward a particular thing or person.
- When misbehaviour happens try “I see you need help with...” (cleaning up, not kicking the table).
- Warnings/second chances may not work as the child may not have sense of attachment that motivates them to please adults

Accommodate to Child’s Needs

- Children communicate through behaviour. Think about the causes of a child’s behaviour before giving discipline.
- React to the child’s developmental age, not his or her biological age.

(Child Safety Commissioner, 2007; Ziegler, D.)

Build in Opportunities for Emotional Regulation

Many children who have experienced trauma have difficulty regulating their moods. By building in emotional regulation in class, these children are given the opportunity to emotionally regulate and process the difficult feelings they may be holding.

Structuring the Class

- Structure everyday experiences to have three distinct phases of activities to support arousal regulation: 10 minutes excitement – 10 minutes calming – 30 minutes concentration.
- Incorporate regular relaxation activities into class time.
- Utilize music in the classroom - rhythmical music such as drumming.
- Provide calming boxes or calming zones where children can have the opportunity to ground and experience tactile sensations.

Focus on Emotions

- Integrate emotional literacy activities into the curriculum to recognize, identify, and manage feelings.
- Use feeling faces to extend the range of emotional expressions that students can interpret. Draw, color, cut out magazine pictures, feelings bingo.
- Incorporate symbols for feelings to promote communication (ie. colours, pictures, headlines, signs).
- Practice different strategies and actions to respond to a feeling or behaviour.
- Facilitate opportunities for self-monitoring involving scoring, feelings magnets or visual cues.
- Model and discuss your own calming strategies to manage stressful situations.
- Use expressive learning - kids with trauma come to school with lots of emotion and poorly regulated excitement, expressive learning can be a place to process some of this.

(The Australian Childhood Foundation, 2010)

Clear and Flexible Teaching Instruction

Delivering Information

- Use short, clear and sequenced instructions which are repeated during tasks.

- Use multiple strategies to communicate information or instructions for tasks (ie. verbal instructions, visual reinforcement, practice, and role play).
- Provide a range of methods to reinforce behavioural expectations, include visual, auditory, sensory, words and pictures.
- Provide external cognition. Give plenty of examples of meaning making, concept linking, and organization of assignments as a child with trauma may not have cognitive ability at the time to do this on their own.

Flexibility

- Teach to individual learning style.
- Variety can provide a child with sense of control and the ability to choose what they can succeed in. Help move through this variety with ample transition time.
- Group work opportunity. Children with trauma may not be willing to participate in groups, but give children the option and opportunity as social support is very important for all children.

Classroom Rules

- Develop a shared code of conduct for all classrooms within the school.
- Involve students in developing classroom rules. Keep rules short and simple. Display visual reminders around the classroom and integrate rules into classroom activities to provide opportunities for rehearsal.

School Work

- Adapt assignments for children with trauma. Shorten assignments, give extra time.
- Give permission to leave class if a child is overwhelmed by a task. Provide additional support for organizing/remembering assignments.
- Postpone large assignments/tests following a traumatic event.
- Avoid competition.

- Foster enjoyment and fun. It is much easier to learn while having fun.

Provide Choice and Control

- Trauma intensifies children's need for control. For demanding, controlling, or stubborn children give them control over small things. For example, "Which activity would you like to do, A or B?"
- Encourage and validate children as they try new things or work independently.
- When children feel like they have choice and control, they will be calmer and less controlling. This helps build self-efficacy, trust, and a sense of identity.

(Child Safety Commissioner, 2007; Health Federation of Philadelphia, 2010; The Australian Childhood Foundation, 2010; Ziegler, D.)

Nurture Competence

Opportunities for Success

- Consider looking after an animal as a group.
- Consider building groups around areas of interest, instead of social ability.
- Provide small challenges with achievable goals.
- Integrate improvisational games or class puzzles for fun and flexibility.
- Find an activity the student enjoys or is skilled at and facilitate opportunity for them to invite others to participate.
- Promote the strengths and interests of the student.

Provide Guided Opportunities for Helpful Participation

- Belonging provides opportunities to be heard, to have responsibility, and engage in problem solving.
- Helping others fosters resiliency and may provide insight into one's struggles.
- Carefully plan, model, and observe ongoing interactions.
- Provide supervised and guided opportunities.

Acknowledge Good Choices

- Children with trauma may receive little praise and often don't respond well to it.
- Provide praise that is concrete, specific and delivered with a neutral tone.
- Avoid praise for about internal characteristics such as "You are such a good girl" as the child may believe they are in fact bad.
- Comment on actions so child can feel good about what they have done, and do not have to think about whom they are and if they are intrinsically good.
- "That was a good decision to not fight with Tyler; I see that was hard to do".
- "You played well in group today".
- Praise more success than failures. Children with trauma may often feel like a failure before even starting a task, make sure to acknowledge the everyday and small successes.

(The Australian Childhood Foundation, 2010; The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2008, The State of Washington, 2011; Ziegler, D.)

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