

CHILDREN, TRAUMA, AND DEVELOPMENT: New understanding and approaches

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Who is your School Psychologist?

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The Impact of Trauma on Student Functioning

The following information is summarized with permission from a professional learning session conducted by Dr. Kristen McLeod for the New Brunswick Association of School Psychologists November 17, 2014.

Trauma is very present in our schools. It is estimated that one in four children entering school have experienced trauma, and by sixteen years of age, approximately 68% of children have experienced a traumatic episode. Most childhood trauma is experienced within the context of an interpersonal relationship. It is considered most damaging when inflicted by a primary caregiver. Children who have experienced a single episode of trauma typically have very different behavioural and emotional outcomes than children who have experienced chronic trauma. Examples of trauma can range from experiences such as a single episode of a house fire or a car accident to recurrent child abuse or witnessing violence. *Complex* trauma describes the experience of multiple, chronic, and developmentally adverse traumatic events.

Neurological research is informing our understanding of the effects of trauma on the developing brain, and as a result, on the developing child. Studies indicate that the stress response (altered neurochemical activity) activated by trauma can be toxic to the developing brain, impacting gene expression, as well as brain structure, volume, and function. These neurological changes can impact future learning, and have been linked to impairments in important functions such as impulse control, problem-solving ability, and the ability to regulate emotions.



A TRAUMA-INFORMED LENS: SUPPORTING STUDENTS

Traumatized children often display maladaptive behaviour such as running away, aggression, defiance, and anticipatory rejection, amongst others, to perceived threats. These behaviours are rarely conscious and are often shameful for the child, who may feel unlovable and experience self-loathing. This in turn, triggers defensive behaviours such as blaming others or pretending not to care.

Trauma-informed school personnel are better able to recognize the effects of trauma on learning and behaviour. With a trauma-informed lens, we can understand the impact of trauma, the triggers for the child, and their sense of shame and distrust. This understanding helps us to respond to children in a way that does not further traumatize them, but will instead meet their needs in safe, positive, and effective ways. Attention shifts from **discipline** to **meeting the child's needs** – creating a sense of safety for the student, helping the student develop regulation skills through connection not coercion, providing structure, having achievable expectations, and responding instead of reacting. To meet the child's needs, we must understand that the child's behaviour is a maladaptive fight or flight response. The child needs a safe space for calming as well as sensory and emotional modulation activities (e.g., relaxation breathing).

How You Might Support Students

When working with a triggered child, we need to remain calm and attuned to the child – to be fully self-regulating of ourselves, including not only our verbal communication, but also, and often most importantly, our non-verbal communication.

Becoming trauma-informed shifts our thinking, and so, our practice. Traditional explanations of a student's behaviour are replaced by trauma-informed understanding:

- He is trying to get his own way → He is having a triggered response and is in fight or flight mode
- He is oppositional → He trusts no one
- Time out works for everyone → Time out can frighten and isolate
- Punishments teach → Debriefs/connections teach
- She needs to be accountable → She needs to learn to feel safe and how to regulate so she can accept responsibility without shame

As school personnel, we are typically concerned with learning what works and what does not work – how do I use this information?

Strategies that often fail with traumatized children include:

- Providing many consequences
- Demanding “respect” when the child is upset
- Assuming they can learn or remember while stressed/reactive
- Using strategies that rely on emotional/cognitive skills to manage frustration and stress
- Ignoring body language
- **Taking the behaviour personally**

A TRAUMA-INFORMED LENS: SUPPORTING STUDENTS

Strategies that tend to work with traumatized children include:

- Staying calm (this is key!)
- Focusing on the relationship
- Attuning to and connecting with the child
- Adjusting the environment to limit frustration/triggers and to increase safety
- Actively assessing and addressing triggers (e.g., hunger)
- Planning proactively for difficulties and problem-solving
- Teaching skills to develop self-regulation (identifying emotions, sensory/emotion regulation, emotion expression)
- Adopting sensory strategies first; developing a “cool-down kit”
- Helping the child learn their triggers and self-regulation strategies
- Learning what is likely to help the child calm down

To help a child work through a problem, use the “*Make-it-Right*” Discipline process by following these steps:

- 1) The child shows behaviour difficulty (post-traumatic adaptation)
- 2) Provide safety, calming, and supportive modulation
- 3) Attune and connect to the child
- 4) Problem-solving/skill building
- 5) Making it Right (how do we make it better) – allow the child opportunity to make it better

Interested in learning more?

Dr. Kristen McLeod is offering sessions in and near New Brunswick in the spring.

- *Parenting in the Eye of the Hurricane* is an educational workshop for caregivers of children impacted by chronic trauma and neglect. It will be offered in Amherst, NS on March 7th and 8th, 2015. Individuals can inquire for details at parentingintheeye@gmail.com.
- *The Trauma-Informed Classroom* will be offered at the Simonds High School Theatre in Saint John, NB on May 1, 2015 from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Individuals can inquire at nbasp.exec@gmail.com to have a brochure sent out and to register.



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