

DE-ESCALATION

“For traumatized children school will either confirm that the world is filled with unresponsive, threatening adults and peers or these children will learn that there are places that are safe, stimulating and even fun.” Dr. Dave Ziegler

Children coping with high levels of community violence become overly reactive because they are constantly anxious about their safety, and have negative expectations about the motivations of others. Their behaviors are often categorized as aggressive, defiant, and oppositional. Consequently, educators’ interactions with them become increasingly focused on punitive discipline and reactive behavior management, rather than on developing their talents and skills.

To guard against spiraling into a pattern of negative teacher-student interactions, these research-to-practice briefs are dedicated to discussing relational discipline (developing and utilizing strong, mutually respectful, student-teacher relationships to engage cooperation in the classroom) and verbal de-escalation (listening and communication skills that prevent conflict escalation).

Importance of Establishing Positive Connections

The research on de-escalation has built a consensus that in an elementary classroom setting, children who have experienced complex trauma from abusive and disorganized attachments are at risk for academic and behavioral challenges. Complex trauma is described as the pervasive developmental long-term consequences of interpersonal victimization that involves multiple exposures for an extended duration. Child abuse and neglect usually occur during a developmentally vulnerable period; such stress can cause substantial structural and functional neurobiological change. This brief introduces educators and counselors to the characteristics that research evidence has suggested contribute to more effective de-

escalation. Fostering a sense of attachment between educators and students is paramount as it directly impacts academic motivation and student relationships with peers and teachers. These goals encompass preventive de-escalation, the set of actions a teacher can take to de-escalate trauma related anxieties before they develop into challenging behaviors.

Establishing safety

Students can only be successful in an environment that is emotionally and physically safe and where self-efficacy and a sense of mastery are fostered. Children who are experiencing trauma tend to live in the moment; delving into the past or planning into the future

are enormous challenges for them. Therefore, they require a classroom that imparts a sense of immediate and consistent security so that they can foster relationships, engage in appropriate and stimulating activities, and feel that they can complete tasks successfully. To this end, teachers must assess and determine what each student's respective needs, abilities and triggers are.

Showing Empathy

Traumatized students have difficulty in modulating their arousal levels and can display unregulated flight, fight or freeze reactions. An educator who is unaware or possesses modest training might infer a challenging behavior as defiant and discipline the child in a punitive manner. However, a trained teacher can recognize

possible symptoms and determine potential remedies such as incorporating movement breaks into lesson activities. Students exhibiting symptoms of complex trauma require structure and guidance from their teachers; step-by-step instructions are useful in this regard as they serve a clear purpose and break down information in shorter units.

Building acceptance

Children who do not have a caring elder in their life whom they can orient to can suffer from 'orienting voids' and have usually experienced a certain degree of complex trauma. Such children tend to be withdrawn or do not have a sense of belonging or loyalty as their understanding of attachment to a parent/elder is distorted. Their exhibited behaviors are usually emotional

regulation strategies to avoid or rectify unbearable affect. Teachers can include explicit instruction around identification of emotions in order to improve emotional and self-regulation, relationship development and decision-making. These skills are critical for a child to build a personal narrative that identifies the effects of trauma and increases interpersonal capacities.

Developing trust

For children suffering from complex trauma, the need for a trusting relationship with a caring elder is of paramount importance. Research has shown that there is a correlation between children with disruptive caregiver relationships and involvement in special education or emotional disturbance classes. As these students

are primarily concerned with internal issues of trust, security and safety, their basic survival instincts dominate. The ability to form a trusting, attached relationship with a teacher can have a significant impact on reading success. Reading is a

social activity based on trust – the teacher assumes that the child tries to the best of their ability while the child believes that the teacher will satisfy their needs. Research shows that the more understood children feel, the more likely they are to understand their own psychological makeup and that of others. This is likely to help them become more aware of the causal link between their thoughts and actions, thereby leading to improvements in emotional intelligence, personal confidence, and competence in building relationships.

“An unaware teacher might infer that the child is being defiant and might mete out appropriate discipline; however, an aware teacher would recognize the behavior and take appropriate action to ameliorate it.”

Adapted From:

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