

DEALING WITH TRAUMA IN THE CLASSROOM

Strategies for Teachers

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In this handout, I offer you some starting points so you can:

- Understand the impact of trauma
- Recognise it
- Deal with it
- Keep yourself well and safe

“ Living with trauma and experiencing traumatic events affect development. Understanding its impact is crucial in knowing how we can best deal with it. ”



What Is Trauma?

I want to keep this as simple as I can because when we actually get down to exploring how the brain works, it can all get quite complicated. Most of what we know (about 90%) has only been discovered in the last twenty years. If we've got a two-mile stretch in our understanding of the brain, then we have walked two inches!

The word trauma is now used to depict an emotional injury to the brain. Robust neuroscience tells us that childhood adversity such as neglect, abuse, living with domestic violence or one off traumatic events alters and impacts upon the way the brain develops. Brain development is especially vulnerable in early childhood. (This has been recognised by the 1001 Day Manifesto¹.)

Trauma occurs when the survival part of our nervous system is triggered, cortisol floods the brain, reducing blood supply and negatively impacting on the limbic system. The full impact of trauma is entirely dependent on the ecosystem around the child².

The limbic system is sometimes called 'the emotional brain'. It controls many of the most fundamental emotions and drives for survival. It is the limbic system that initiates the fight, flight or freeze responses to threat. A study by Teicher et al. (1993) found a 38% increased rate of limbic abnormalities ('emotional brain') following physical abuse, 49% after sexual abuse, and 113% following abuse of more than one type combined³.

How Can We Recognise It In The Classroom?

Children who have suffered, or are suffering, childhood trauma will have developed a complex way to manage that and survive. They are likely to have a view of the world that is fearful, that the world is a scary place and that adults are frightening. Some clues to look out for are:

- Hypervigilance
- Poor boundaries
- 'Meltdown' when plans change
- Anxiety about basic needs, eg. Issues around food
- Anxiety generally
- Poor relationships with peers
- Poor impulse control
- Withdrawn, fearful, avoidant
- Demonstrably distressed a lot
- Poor language and communication skills



Why is it important to recognise this behaviour?

- To reduce the child's stress efficiently. This prevents more damage to the nervous system and lessens the shame that the child may need to overcome after having a 'meltdown'.
- So other traumatised children in the classroom are not 'triggered' rendering a roomful of children potentially in distress
- Trauma affects how we think. A teacher wants a child to think. The classroom environment needs to be conducive to thinking.
- **But most of all**, so you can be safe in the room, enabling incidents to reduce over time creating a calmer classroom where all the learning that is needed to take place, can take place.

How Can We Deal With It In The Classroom?

It is vital for this to be dealt with effectively in the classroom so that learning can take place for everyone. In order for the brain to work at its most optimum level, we need to feel safe.

So what can teachers do to help students in their classrooms and create a 'trauma aware' classroom? A setting that supports and nurtures children who have experienced trauma, children who may be vulnerable and the rest of the school should something traumatic happen to them?

- Once you have identified that something is going on for the child, then there must follow an intervention. Be curious. Investigate in a non-judgemental, emotionally available way. Remember you are the regulating adult and they need you to help them feel safe. Nothing can be done until that child feels safe, so the time it takes to do that can be worth a long time in teaching terms. It only takes a moment to pause and become aware and consider trauma. That one intervention in that moment has the potential to change that child's life.
- Being alert to what is about to happen before it occurs will also give you time to pause and be able to meet that child exactly where they are at. Are they breathing faster? Do they have the rabbit caught in the headlights look? Are their fists clenched? These signs are easier to spot once you get to know that individual and how they become when their stress system is activated. Teaching them how to identify their own physiology is even more powerful, helping them to pause in that moment, but that might take some time!
- Do not change the routines of the day without prior warning. Survival mode can easily kick in here as the fear of the unknown, the broken routine, the place of safety, can all come into question.
- When moving from one activity to another, create a sense of calm and routine around this. Chaos is no place for a traumatised child.
- Have an essential oil on the go in your room. If you can create an association between calmness and a certain smell, you will be doing a huge amount of work with the child's subconscious in a very positive way.
- Many schools are practising mindfulness and meditation in the classroom particularly after break to enable a calm transition back into the learning space. Do this safely; ask permission, tell students that they do not need to close their eyes, suggest they observe first of all if they are anxious.



How Can You Take Care of YOU In The Classroom?

YOU are a human being, full of empathy and a desire to make a difference. That is why you are a teacher. This of itself makes you more susceptible to burnout, secondary trauma and vicarious trauma. YOU are the self-regulating adult in the room. YOU have to be resilient and 'well' so that you can be emotionally available for your children, especially your traumatised children. Resilient children need resilient adults.

YOUR health and wellbeing is not a luxury; it is a fundamental requirement and necessity. No ifs. No buts. Suggestions include:

- Switch off before bed with a relaxation guided meditation. So many teachers work until their eyes close having only briefly paused to see to their own families
- Try mindfulness colouring
- Walk in nature
- Exercise
- Yoga
- Always have a nutritional breakfast. Use a Nutribullet for a juice full of goodness
- Try and get to bed before 10.30pm more nights than not
- Set your alarm for an hour earlier so you can wake up slowly in a relaxed way, in bed, with your hot beverage of choice
- Be kind to yourself
- Develop your own awareness about your own life experiences so that you can deal with them without worry of being 'trauma triggered' by your children.



Remember:
You're
amazing!

1. Please see <http://www.1001criticaldays.co.uk/> for more information
2. Bronfenbrenners Eco-System explains this impact
3. Streeck-Fischer & van der Kolk, 2000