

# The Trauma- Sensitive Teacher

**Susan E. Craig**

**D**iane was excited about the holiday celebration she had prepared for her students. She'd spent weeks selecting a special puppet for each of her 2nd graders. Now, as she watched Chris mercilessly cut the plumage off the parrot puppet she thought he'd love, Diane felt herself blush with embarrassment and frustration. But she quickly caught herself. She recognized Chris's behavior as a reenactment of his past traumatic experiences with caregivers. He was in foster care because his mother was hospitalized for depression. In earlier years, Chris's mother was often unable to care for Chris and his brothers. Years of neglect and the eventual separation from his mother and siblings left him angry and distrustful.

Knowing Chris's history gave Diane the objectivity she needed to avoid personalizing his behaviors. Instead of reacting to his behavior, she directed her attention to the other children and got them started on a new activity. Chris soon stopped cutting and put his head in his hands. Diane sat beside him and quietly asked if he'd like to sit in the rocking chair until he was feeling better. He nodded, and she walked him to the chair. She placed her hand on his shoulder, smiled, and told him that when he was ready, she'd help him fix the puppet. When Chris nodded and started rocking, Diane knew that she'd made the right decision in offering him support. Her

*To engage children with early trauma histories, focus on relationships, not reenactments.*

compassionate response helped Chris return to a safer, more neutral psychological space, while at the same time reinforcing her relationship with him.

Diane is among a growing number of educators who are trained to view children's difficult behaviors through a *trauma-sensitive lens*. She is prepared for occurrences of trauma-related behaviors and is able to respond in a manner that promotes resilience and recovery.

## **Early Trauma Histories**

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that threatens children's academic and social mastery (Oehlberg, 2012). National databases suggest that 26 percent of children in the United States will witness or experience a traumatic event before the age of 4 (National Center for Mental Health Promotion and Youth Violence Prevention, 2012). Data from the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (Felitti, et al., 1998) suggests that the rate is even higher—one in three children may have an early trauma history. These numbers are shocking, and, it can be argued, go a long way in explaining why so many young people struggle in school.

Some early childhood trauma occurs as a result of

accidents, medical procedures, or community violence. The stress of living in chronic poverty is also traumatic for children when the hassle of daily life limits their caregivers' ability to shelter them from adversity (Lieberman & Osofsky, 2009).

The most widespread source of childhood trauma, however, is maltreatment. In 2014, state agencies across the country estimated that there were 702,000 victims of child maltreatment (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2016). Parents or primary caregivers are almost always responsible for this type of trauma (van der Kolk, 2005). As a result, these experiences are often unseen or unrecognized by out-

siders, including teachers and school administrators.

A child's brain architecture changes as a result of trauma. These changes jeopardize children's ability to direct their attention, regulate their emotions and behavior, and form positive relationships with teachers. However, with the right training and support, teachers can collaborate with these children in ways that help them move beyond past traumas and embrace the benefits of rich educational experiences.

### Forming Positive Relationships

Children with early trauma histories have a compulsive need to reenact past traumas. The drive toward reenactment is like a riptide that threatens to bring down both child and teacher. The child is always on the lookout for a parental or authority figure with whom to replay past traumatic experiences—all with the hope that the outcome might be different.

Of course, none of this is conscious, but it is the basis for much of the provocative behavior demonstrated by traumatized children. Unless teachers are trained to recognize these behaviors as bids for reenactment, they can get pulled into the undertow in one of two ways: by responding with anger or by feeling victimized by the child's rage. In either case, the child's behavior will escalate and he or she will feel even more out of control.

Teachers hoping to form positive relationships with students exhibiting these compulsive behaviors require



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above-average self-monitoring skills. These skills allow teachers to maintain objectivity as they simultaneously monitor their own internal state while observing what's going on in the environment.

This objectivity improves all aspects of teaching but is indispensable when de-escalating children's behavior. It allows teachers to refrain from reacting to overtly hostile or menacing conduct. Instead, these teachers are

able to redirect children's behavior in calm, respectful, and sometimes playful ways. In some cases, teachers use strategies that communicate comfort and validate the teacher's relationship with the child. That's what Diane did when she suggested that Chris sit in the rocking chair. Her comforting smile and offer to help fix the puppet were further proof that she was on his side and that their relationship remained intact.

Teachers can also reassure children that the relationship they share is capable of handling strong emotions. By staying calm in a moment of crisis, teachers show children that they are neither frightened nor surprised by strong feelings. Rather, they know what to do to bring those feelings under control. This support increases children's ability to tolerate uncomfortable feelings and eventually to become more adept at controlling them.

Within this context, redirection becomes an opportunity to strengthen relationships and build children's inner strengths.

### Directing Attention

Children's brains develop in a use-dependent manner that relies to a great extent on their early environments. Interactions with caregivers prime the brain to expect certain experiences. The brain then prepares anticipatory sets of neural pathways ready to respond. Those with early trauma histories become particularly attentive to perceptions of negativity from adults. They expect to be judged and/or rejected by teachers and others

playing a parental role. Some children shut down completely; others become hypervigilant. In either case, their guarded attitude limits their ability to participate in classroom activities that require a willingness to engage in novel or risk-taking behaviors. Their attention is on survival rather than on the content of instruction.

Gaining students' attention requires teachers to establish themselves as trusted collaborators. Teachers like Diane find that students are less defensive when classroom routines are predictable and consistent. Established routines help students know what's going on and what is expected of them. Simple visual icons representing major events of the day help them keep track of classroom activities.

Teachers implementing a trauma-sensitive approach try to avoid abrupt changes, but they address the fact that there will be surprises. For instance, Diane finds it helpful to use an icon for "break." She places it in the schedule at times when something outside the usual routine happens, such as a fire drill.

Diane also understands the importance of designing lessons so that they follow the same sequence of steps with a standard format and cues. Diane starts by connecting with students emotionally—she reminds them of the things that are going well and how much she enjoys being with them. She then picks up her magic wand and tells students to listen carefully because something important is coming up, thereby directing children's attention to instructional content as it is presented. The playful manner of using a prop keeps children relaxed and signals Diane's willingness to work with them to master what comes next. As children's trust grows, so do the neural pathways required for sustained attention.

### **Learning to Control Emotions**

Within the safety of a predictable classroom environment, teachers can show students how to use their minds to rein in their emotions. They begin by encouraging students to look inside themselves and notice what's going on. Observing their own internal landscape helps students discover two important aspects of attention:

their internal world is full of sensations, images, feelings, and thoughts competing for attention; and they can choose what to focus on.

Diane uses the analogy of an awareness wheel to help children understand how attention works (Siegel, 2010). Every morning, her students look at the picture of a wagon wheel hanging in the classroom. Then they close their eyes to visualize their own awareness wheel. They imagine their mind as the wheel's hub. Sensations, thoughts, feelings, and images are spokes that extend from the hub to the wheel rim. None of these can command the attention of the hub without its permission. Diane reminds children that attention always involves choice. At the end of the exercise, she encourages students to pick a goal for the day and to make choices that focus their attention on achieving that goal.

This is a liberating exercise for children with early trauma histories. They are used to focusing on reoc-

curing memories of the past whenever they arise. These intrusive reminders of past traumas divert their attention away from what's happening in real time. As they learn to observe their internal world, children can choose to attend to the sensations, images, feelings, and thoughts that foster curiosity and enthusiasm rather than those that trigger lethargy and despair.

Twenty-six percent of children in the United States will witness or experience a traumatic event before the age of four.

It also helps children separate who they are from what they feel—an important step for those with early trauma histories. Chris is a good example of how learning to look inward helps children curb their impulsivity. He loved all things on wheels, including bikes, trucks, and motorcycles, so the awareness wheel image resonated with him. On bad days, he'd tell Diane that his kindness spoke was rusty or that he needed help repairing his relaxation spoke. Imagining his behavior as a wheel that he could control and repair gave him the courage to ask for help. Over time and with the help of strategies like these, Chris acquired the skills and self-control he needed to succeed in school.

### **Regulating Emotions and Behavior**

Early childhood trauma affects every aspect of children's stress regulation. A whole host of behaviors—ranging

from low energy and lack of motivation to aggression and defiance—can be attributed to traumatized children's inability to find and sustain a comfortable level of arousal.

It's the old "fight, flight, or freeze" problem. Children who "fight" in stressful situations become hyper-aroused under stress. In a classroom environment, they are likely to be defiant, noisy, and capable of prolonged acting out behavior. Children who demonstrate "freeze" or "flee" behaviors downshift and zone out when their stress level becomes intolerable. They appear unmotivated, disinterested, and may even fall asleep.

Diane's training in trauma management enables her to engage children in a type of coregulation, particularly by integrating soothing, sensory-based activities into classroom instruction. Most are familiar to teachers and have been understood as instructional best practices for years—things like movement, deep breathing, music, stretching, and frequent opportunities for self-reflection.

Diane was comfortable with starting each lesson with a few deep breaths, and she always wrapped up an activity with a few minutes to summarize or reflect. But she was concerned that movement activities might be distracting or upset the flow. She decided to start with hand movements and seated stretches. Eventually she invited students to move around the room to find a partner for a "think-pair-share" activity or travel to preassigned tables for group work. As her comfort level increased, Diane found more and more opportunities for movement that helped students stay calm while avoiding the chaos she feared.

Collaborating with children in their efforts to maintain a comfortable level of arousal goes a long way in nurturing positive relationships with them.

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When teachers frequently use brief check-ins or breath breaks, children know that their teachers are attuned to their needs, even when holding them to high standards of behavior. Talking to children about self-soothing activities they can use to feel better reinforces the idea that teachers are there to support them. Easy access to nonverbal stress-busters, such as stretching or fidget toys, serves as yet another reminder that teachers value their feelings and want them to do well.

### **Toward Resilience and Rehabilitation**

Fostering positive relationships with traumatized children starts with recognizing that early adversity has played a role in their neural development. Behaviors that now threaten these children's academic and social mastery were originally adaptations they made to the uncontrollable stress in their lives. With this knowledge, teachers can approach students whom they previously viewed as oppositional or defiant with a better understanding of what's behind their trauma-related behaviors. This is an important first step in

building teachers' capacity to respond in a manner that promotes resilience and rehabilitation. ■

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