Teaching as Accommodation: The Benefits of Teaching All Children Through a Trauma-Informed Lens

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TEACHING AS ACCOMMODATION:
THE BENEFITS OF TEACHING ALL CHILDREN
THROUGH A TRAUMA-INFORMED LENS

Megan Retzloff

May 2023

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science in Education in the Art of Teaching
Sarah Lawrence College
Abstract

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are an epidemic in our society. In 2021 alone, an estimated 600,000 children in the United States experienced abuse or neglect, with 90.6% of all reported cases documenting one or both parents as the perpetrator (HHS, 2023). As educators, we play an important role in preventing and mitigating the effects of ACEs in our students. When a child’s home life is unstable, schools and teachers are the next line of defense. Throughout the United States, schools are the constant; they are a universal provider even in areas that otherwise have limited access to support. Schools are the closest thing we have to an equalizing and unifying protective factor against ACEs. In my thesis, I work to give teachers concrete examples of the effects of trauma as they appear in classrooms, and then suggest a broad approach to trauma-informed teaching. Using curb-cut theory as a guide, I propose that when we take strategies that are designed to accommodate children who have experienced trauma, and apply them to all students, everyone benefits.
Acknowledgments

There is an old adage that says “it takes a village to raise a child.” I have heard this phrase many times throughout the course of my life and I feel that it is just as applicable now as it was then. This work would not have been possible without the support of the people around me, and to that end, I would like to acknowledge those who have influenced me most in the course of pursuing my degree.

To Michelle Foerder for being my first mentor teacher and showing me how to appreciate each child as they are, for who they are, and to see the goodness in them at all times; to teach with a gentle, guiding hand, and always make room for new ideas.

To Jackie Lutz-Hibbard for being my first friend at college and pushing me out of my shell. For sticking with me despite a pandemic, long-distance, and a school-transfer. For always keeping me accountable, making me laugh when I wanted to cry, and never giving up on me.

To my don, Joel Sternfeld, who taught me how to adapt and modify plans on a moment's notice and always supported me through all my whims and chaos. You taught me that it was not only okay for things to not go according to plan, but that sometimes it was nothing short of wonderful.

To Cassandra Santos, for always being there to lend a listening ear or provide advice as I navigated my first year in the graduate program. Your classroom was a safe space of collaboration and I always felt that I could go to you for anything.

To Farrah Gilani for making me feel seen and showing me that all ways of thinking are beautiful and valid. I looked forward to your class every week because I knew that it was always going to be something wonderful. You showed me how to make space for everyone, teach to the
needs of both individuals and a group, and if some day I am half the teacher you are, I know I will have done something right.

To Denisha Jones for her unwavering support even through difficult times. You are a constant ray of light on a cloudy day. You taught with love and care and while never sacrificing your high expectations for what you knew your students were capable of.

To Jesus Ayala for always keeping me grounded and reminding me that the world is full of opportunities. I could always go to you for life advice and know that you would be there to tell me exactly what I needed to hear (regardless of whether or not it was what I wanted to hear).

To Carmen King and Marisa Barzelatatto for welcoming me into your class with open arms and showing me how it feels to have a class that is also your family. You showed me that it is ok to be vulnerable when things get tough, but also how to persevere through adversity and continue to be true to yourself. I will never forget my time in your class.

To Jean Kittelstad for always encouraging me to recognize the skills that I have, and showing me how to build on the ones I felt unsure of. You showed me how to balance work with life, and how to navigate the difficulties of what you need to do and what is right.

To my grandmother for always being there to catch me when I fell and always providing me a safe space to go when I needed to get away. For better or worse, I learned my sass from you and I will always value our time together.

To my partner, Curtis Snyder, for being my rock; for always encouraging me, comforting me, and pushing me when I needed it the most. You always knew what I was capable of doing even when I didn’t realize it myself. Thank you for always putting up with me.

And Finally, to my mother and father, for being patient with me through all stages of our relationship: as their child, their student, and their peer. For taking every call, answering every
text, but most of all, for giving me the love, support, and boundaries that I needed to grow as a person. While I owe who I am to everyone in my life, I would not be here at all without you.
Annotated Outline

Introduction and Title
- Thanking everyone for coming and introducing the topic
- Trauma as Accommodation: The Benefits of Teaching All Children Through a Trauma-Informed Lens

Background
- time off after high school
- Working as a leave replacement
- Classrooms then vs. now
  - My mother’s classroom
  - My fieldwork classroom
  - My don’s experience after COVID
  - My partner’s experience after COVID

Classes that introduced me to my topic
- Diversity and Equity in Education (spring 2020)
  - Documentary: Paper Tigers
- Children, Families and Identity
  - The Deepest Well
- The question that arose: What can we as educators do to both combat and mitigate the effects of childhood traumas?

Presentation outline/Table of contents
1. Identifying the Problem: Adverse Childhood Experiences and Trauma
2. Combatting ACEs: School as a Protective Factor
3. The Impact of ACEs in School: What do we see as Teachers?

4. Trauma-Informed Teaching: Overarching Goals and Reservations

5. Curb-Cut Theory: Meeting the needs of some to benefit the Many

6. Implementing Trauma-Informed Teaching: Whole-Classroom Strategies

Section 1 - Identifying the Problem: Adverse Childhood Experiences and Trauma

- What are Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)?
  - Traumatic events that occur before a child reaches the age of 18
  - Trauma by category:
    - Abuse:
      - Psychological
      - Physical
      - Sexual
    - Household Dysfunction:
      - Substance abuse
      - Mental illness
      - Mother treated violently
      - Criminal behavior in household
    - But how prevalent are ACEs in our society?
    - Some statistics to consider:
      - 61% of adults having at least one ACE
      - 1 in 6 having four or more ACEs
      - 1 in 7 children who have experienced neglect in the last year
      - In 2021 an estimated 600,000 children experienced abuse and neglect in the United States
- Child maltreatment victims by Age, 2021
  - 90.6% have parents as the perpetrators
  - 41.32% of cases are children between the ages of 4-11 (average ages for grades K-5)

- Katie Statman-Weil quote:
  - “...educators throughout their careers are likely to teach young children who have experienced trauma. They are in our classrooms and schools, and they need connection and love, just like all other children.” (Statman-Weil, 2020, p. 3)

Section 2 - Combatting ACEs: School as a Protective Factor

- Defining “protective factors”
  - “Conditions or attributes in individuals, families, and communities that promote the health and well-being of children and families. Protective factors are associated with lower likelihood of experiencing ACEs and/or a reduction in the impact of ACEs.” (Children’s Bureau, 2020)

- Why should schools and teachers be responsible?

- 91% of children attend public school in the United States (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022)

Sections 3 - The Impact of ACEs in School: What do we see as Teachers?

- ACE exposure and children’s learning
  - 2014 study where teachers rated children with ACEs lower in developmental areas such as:
    - Social emotional development
    - Literacy development
- Language development
- Cognitive development
- Math development
  - Cite correlation between high numbers of ACEs and lower ratings in each area
- ACE exposure and school success
  - 2018 study found correlation between higher numbers of ACEs in children and increased risk of
    - Poor school attendance
    - Behavioral issues
    - Failure to meet grade-level standards in math, reading, or writing
- Effects on Cognitive Development
  - Sequencing and cause and effect
  - Working memory
  - Attentiveness
  - Cognitive Flexibility
- Effects on Language Development
  - Receptive language development
  - Expressive language development
- Effects on Sensory Development
  - Sensory-seeking behaviors
  - Sensory-avoidant behaviors
- Effects on Social-Emotional Development
  - Identifying feelings, perspective taking, empathy
- Forming relationships with peers and adults
- Curiosity and risk-taking
- Constructive, dramatic, and rule-based play

- How do we create a framework for addressing the needs of these students in the classroom?

**Section 4 - Trauma-Informed Teaching: Overarching Goals and Reservations**

- The four R’s of trauma-informed approaches
  - Realizing the widespread impact of trauma and pathways to recovery
  - Recognizing traumas signs and symptoms
  - Responding by integrating knowledge about trauma into all facets of the system
  - Resisting re-traumatization of trauma-impacted individuals by decreasing the occurrence of unnecessary triggers and implementing trauma-informed procedures and practices.

  - *(National Child Traumatic Network, 2017)*

- Teacher concerns about implementing Trauma-Informed Practices
  - The good of the few vs. the good of the many
  - Limitations based on scope of practice
  - Lengths necessary to identify trauma
  - Folie à deux/second-hand trauma

**Section 5 - Curb-Cut Theory: Meeting the needs of some to benefit the Many**

- “Access for those denied is the goal. Access for everyone is the result” *(Collins, 2021)*
  - The history of curb-cut theory
  - But how does this apply to trauma-informed teaching?
“The curb-cut effect underscores the foundational belief that we are one nation, that we rise or fall together. Without equity, there can be neither progress nor prosperity.” 

(Blackwell, 2016)

- The societal belief that equity is a zero-sum game
- Teachers who feel guilt over needing to prioritize the needs of some students over others
- Curb-cut theory tells us that when we target support where it is needed the most, everyone wins.
- So we take a broad approach to trauma-informed teaching—by taking strategies that are designed to help some and applying them to all, everyone wins.

Section 6 - Implementing Trauma-Informed Teaching: Whole-Classroom Strategies

- “All children share the same inherent desires for safety, love, and connection. Any behaviors that counter these needs are adaptive strategies that come from children attempting to fulfill their unmet needs. To change the strategies they are using, we need to meet their needs; we need to lean into rather than away from them when behaviors get big or hard. By using relationship as the foundation of everything we do with children who have experienced trauma, we work to repair the hurt and pain that came before us and to offer a different perspective for ongoing hurt and pain.” (Statman-Weil, 2020, p. 139)

- Creating safe classrooms (part 1)
  - Look for strengths
  - Use culturally responsive practices
- Create a daily rhythm
- Have clear and consistent expectations
- Creating safe classrooms (part 2)
  - Be mindful of transitions
    - Find ways to reduce transitions
    - Teach the expectations of transitions
    - Use similar phrases or songs during transitions to create rhythm and ritual
    - Make transitions fun
    - Keep transitions short
    - Stay close and offer guidance
    - Be an external regulator
    - Allow for transitional objects
- Supporting Empowerment (part 1)
  - Encourage leadership
  - Allow time for play
  - Hold high expectations
  - Create a proactive environment
- Supporting Empowerment (part 2)
  - Offer choices
    - Steps for offering choices effectively
    - Importance of acknowledging the child’s wants in a situation without the need to engage in a debate
- Establishing trust
- Ask questions and be non-judgemental
- Follow through
- Acknowledge your own mistakes
- Always work on connection

- Design a thoughtful classroom space
  - Quiet and calm spaces
  - A space that reflects the children
  - Spaces that are free of clutter
  - Spaces that do not overload the senses
  - Spaces that invite exploration and creativity
  - Bring natural elements to make the space feel open

Closing quote from Bessel van der Kolk
- “The greatest hope for traumatized, abused, and neglected children is to receive a good education in schools where they are seen and known, where they learn to regulate themselves, and where they can develop a sense of agency. At their best, schools can function as islands of safety in a chaotic world. They can teach children how their bodies and brains work and how they can understand and deal with their emotions. Schools can play a significant role in instilling the resilience necessary to deal with the traumas of neighborhoods or families.” (van der Kolk, 2014)
Process Paper

Back in 2014, after graduating high school, I took some time off and ended up working as a leave replacement in a private elementary school. This…was not my plan. Which isn’t to say that I had grand notions of what my time off would be, but at the very least, I didn’t expect my time away from school to be spent back in a school. But life is a funny thing, and regardless of how I expected my time off to go, I couldn’t be happier with how it went. I spent most of my time in a second grade classroom under the guiding hand of Michelle Foerder. Michelle took me under her wing and showed me how to turn chaos into joy, see the good in every student, and always end the day smiling. My time spent in her class was something I will never forget, and is what drove me to pursue my education degree with the hope of one day returning to her classroom as a permanent fixture.

However, by the time I had finished the majority of my undergraduate degree, I found that classrooms were quickly becoming something different that what I had experienced in my four years as a leave replacement. In my mother’s new classroom, she was constantly putting out metaphorical fires of students too young, experiencing emotions and behaviors that were disproportionate to anything she had seen before in her nearly thirty years of teaching. Coming out of COVID, I noticed students in my fieldwork who seemed to be learning for the first time how to build with blocks and play amicably as a group. At the college level, my don noted the strong impact the pandemic had had on his students (and in turn, the quality of their work). This sentiment was echoed by my own partner who voiced concern that the students in his college courses also turned in work more reminiscent of a sophomore or junior in high school. But why was this happening? That is the question that continued eating at me.

It wasn’t until spring of 2022 in the class *Children, Families and Identity*, that I began to
see the answer that had been eluding me. As we began to address the problem of Adverse Childhood Experiences (or ACEs) in class, it brought me back to a documentary I had watched for another class earlier in my academic career: *Paper Tigers*. *Paper Tigers* is a documentary that followed six students through the course of a school year as their school implemented a new trauma-sensitive program based on research regarding ACEs. The film highlighted the direct connection between what teachers were seeing in their classrooms, and what these children were experiencing at home. And as my new course dove deeper into the subject of ACEs, it clicked: what my mother was experiencing in her classroom; what I was seeing in my fieldwork; what my don and my partner were both seeing in their college courses; all of these could be explained as symptoms of trauma manifesting in an academic setting.

It was at this point that I knew what my focus was going to be. If I am going to be a teacher, I have to have an answer to this problem (or at least know what to expect). But at the same time, I found myself hesitating. Trauma is a wildly delicate and complex thing to tackle. I wondered if it was even appropriate for me to consider addressing it in my role as a teacher. To begin my research, I wanted to find an expert with a background in psychology who could give me a clearer understanding of exactly what I was seeing and if there was anything I could do about it in my capacity as a teacher. It was at this point that I discovered a continuing education course on Teaching Trail Blazers entitled, “Trauma Responsive Strategies with Katie Statman-Weil”. Katie Statman-Weil was listed as a licensed clinical social worker/therapist with a doctorate in education, and in this particular course, she talked about trauma-responsive strategies in the classroom and how they can benefit every student (not only those who had experienced traumas). Everything that she addressed was exactly what I had been looking for: a professional who asserted that it was not only okay for teachers to intervene in these matters, but
that the involvement of teachers was crucial in supporting a child going through a trauma.

As I pushed forward and continued pursuing this idea, I always kept in mind that I was creating a blueprint for the type of teacher that I wanted to become. As a teacher, I want to create a learning environment that is safe and accommodating for everyone. I wanted to identify or create something foundational that would enable me to create a space that self-manages; that is proactive as opposed to reactive when it comes to the needs of my students. I want my student not to just get through the year, but to depart from my class better than when they entered. I want to give them the tools that they need to persevere through all areas of their life, and not just survive, but thrive.
Bibliography and References


Teaching as Accommodation: The Benefits of Teaching All Children Through a Trauma-Informed Lens

Megan Retzloff
Master Thesis
April 2023

- I’d like to take a moment to thank everyone who is here today for taking time out of their busy schedules to see the culmination of my thesis project.
- My topic is Teaching as Accommodation: The benefits of Teaching All Children Through a Trauma-Informed Lens
Before going into my main presentation, I wanted to take a moment to reflect on what led me to this point.

Back in 2014, after graduating high school, I took some time off and ended up working as a leave replacement in a private elementary school. This…was not my plan. Which isn’t to say that I had grand notions of what my time off would be, but at the very least, I didn’t expect my time away from school to be spent back in a school.

But life is a funny thing, and regardless of how I expected my time off to go, I couldn’t be happier with how it went.

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My time spent in her class was something I will never forget, and is what drove me to pursue my education degree with the hope of one day returning to her classroom as a permanent fixture.

But by the time I had finished most of my undergraduate degree, I found that classrooms were quickly becoming something different that what I had experienced in my four years as a leave replacement.

In my mother’s new classroom, she was constantly putting out metaphorical fires of students too young, experiencing emotions and behaviors that were disproportionate to anything she had seen before in her near 30 years of teaching.

Coming out of COVID, I noticed students in my fieldwork who seemed to be learning for the first time how to build with blocks and play amicably as a group.
At the college level, my don noted the strong impact the pandemic had had on his students (and in turn, the quality of their work). This sentiment was echoed by my own partner who voiced concern that the students in his college courses also turned in work more reminiscent of a sophomore or junior in high school.
- In Spring 2020, in my class Diversity and Equity in Education, I watched the documentary Paper Tigers. The film followed six students over the course of one school year as their school implemented a new trauma-sensitive program.
- The film not only highlighted the difficulties that these students were having academically, but it tied them directly to traumas that they had or were actively experiencing in their lives outside of school.
- This film opened my eyes to not only the impacts that traumas can have throughout a child’s life, but also to the power that teachers and schools have to be a positive and protective influence against those experiences.

- In Spring 2022, I was brought back to this idea in my graduate class, Children, Families and Identity, when we read the book The Deepest Well. This book truly drove home for me the idea that these “behaviors” that we often see as educators are not “bad children” or one-off behaviors. They are symptoms of a much more serious problem in our society: childhood traumas.

- So my question then became, what can we as educators do to both combat and mitigate the effects of childhood traumas?
Through my presentation, I will explore this topic in six different steps:

1. Identifying the Problem: Adverse Childhood Experiences and Trauma
2. Combatting ACEs: School as a Protective Factor
3. The Impact of ACEs in School: What do we See as Teachers?
4. Trauma-Informed Teaching: Overarching Goals and Reservations
5. Curb-Cut Theory: Meeting the Needs of Some to Benefit the Many
6. Implementing Trauma-Informed Teaching: Whole-Classroom Strategies
- So let's begin. We will start by Identifying the Problem (or Adverse Childhood Experiences and Trauma)
What are Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)?

**Traumatic events that occur before a child reaches the age of 18**

- An Adverse Childhood Experience is a term used to describe a traumatic event that a child experiences before the age of 18.
- The term stems from a prominent study in the 1990s that investigated the relationship between the number of ACEs a person experienced, and a variety of negative outcomes in adulthood such as poor physical health, mental health, and substance abuse.
- The ACEs study looked at childhood trauma in terms of abuse and/or household dysfunction.
- These sections were then split into the following categories:
  - **Abuse:**
    - Psychological abuse
      - Such as a parent or adult swearing at or insulting you, or making you afraid that you would be physically hurt.
    - Physical abuse
      - Such as pushing, grabbing, shoving, or slapping, or hitting so hard that it left marks or other injuries.
    - Sexual abuse
      - Defined as an adult or person at least 5 years or older touching or fondling you in a sexual way, having you touch their body in a sexual way, or attempting or actually having any form of oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse with you.
  - **Household Dysfunction:**
    - Substance abuse
    - Mental Illness
    - Mother Treated Violently
    - Criminal Behavior in Household
- with someone who used street drugs
- Mental Illness
  - Growing up with a household member who was depressed, mentally ill, or who had attempted suicide.
- Mother treated violently
  - Such as being pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her; kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard; hit repeatedly over a few minutes; threatened with or hurt by a knife or gun.
- Criminal behavior in household
  - Having a household member who went to or was actively in prison.

- The results of the study reported a strong relationship between the breath and exposure to abuse or household dysfunction during childhood and multiple risk factors for several of the leading causes of death in adults.
- In essence, the more ACEs you had, the more likely you were to develop conditions as an adult that resulted in a poorer quality of life, and a shorter overall life expectancy.
- But exactly how prevalent are ACEs in our society?

Resources:
Of adults surveyed across 25 states reported they had experienced at least one type of ACE before age 18

1 in 6

Adults reported they had experiences four or more types of ACEs during their childhood

1 in 7

The minimum number of children who have experienced child abuse or neglect in the past year

- Some statistics to consider:
  - About 61% of adults surveyed across 25 states reported that they had experiences at least one type of ACE before age 18
  - Nearly 1 in 6 reported that they had experienced four or more types of ACEs before the age of 18
  - At least 1 in 7 children have experienced child abuse or neglect in the past year in the United States. This is likely an underestimate given that many cases are unreported.

Resources:
In 2021 an estimated 600,000 children experienced abuse and neglect in the United States.

- In 2021 an estimated 600,000 children experienced abuse and neglect in the United States.
- Again, this number is also likely to be an underestimate

Resources:
- In the chart here we can see the percentage of reported cases of Child Maltreatment that correspond with each age from birth through 17
- Of the reported cases of Child Maltreatment, 90.6% documented one or both parents as the perpetrator (or source of the maltreatment)
- And approximately 41.32% of all reported cases accounted for children from the ages of 4 through 11 (the approximate ages for children in Elementary school from grades K-5)

Resources:
“...educators throughout their careers are likely to teach young children who have experienced trauma. They are in our classrooms and schools, and they need connection and love, just like all other children.”

-Katie Statman-Weil

- All of these statistics support what I feel Katie Statman-Weil put best when she said…
- “...educators throughout their careers are likely to teach young children who have experienced trauma. They are in our classrooms and schools, and they need connection and love just like all other children.

Resources:
- So what can we do?
- Well to answer this question, I would like to address the idea of Combatting ACEs, or School as a Protective Factor.
Protective Factors

Conditions or attributes in individuals, families, and communities that promote the health and well-being of children and families. Protective factors are associated with lower likelihood of experiencing ACEs and/or a reduction in the impact of ACEs.

- To begin, we need to define what a Protective Factor is. So, a protective factor is…
- “Conditions or attributes in individuals, families, and communities that promote the health and well-being of children and families. Protective factors are associated with lower likelihood of experiencing ACEs and/or a reduction in the impact of ACEs.”
- But why does this fall on us? Why should teachers and schools be the ones to step in?

Resources:
The approximate percentage of American children who attend public school

- Well, it is important to consider that approximately 91% of american children attend public school. The remaining 9% attend private schools, and a negligible amount are either home schooled or not schooled at all.
- Throughout the United States, whether rural or urban, Tennessee or Long Island, schools are the constant.
- They are a universal provider even in areas that otherwise have limited access to support.
- Schools are the closest thing we have to an equalizing and unifying protective factor against ACEs.
- When a child’s home life is unstable, schools and teachers are the next line of defense.
- So what can we do?

Resources:
The Impact of ACEs in School
What Do We See as Teachers?

- Well to understand what we can do, we first need to understand what it is that we see. So what are the Impacts of ACEs in school, and what do we as teachers see?
Teachers rated children who had experienced ACEs lower on:

- Social Emotional Development
- Literacy Development
- Language Development
- Cognitive Development
- Math Development

- In a 2014 study of children in a federally funded Head Start program, researchers found that teachers rated children who had experienced ACEs lower in the following developmental areas:
  - Social Emotional Development
  - Literacy Development
  - Language Development
  - Cognitive Development
  - Math Development

- In each category, higher ACEs were associated with lower ratings of developmental mastery even after controlling for demographic differences

Resources:
ACE Exposure and School Success

There is a connection between the ACE exposure in children and academic risk

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*This table summarizes the odds ratio for child ACEs as a predictor for three measures of academic risk.

- Additionally, in a 2018 study that looked at the association between ACEs and school success in Elementary school children, researchers found that higher numbers of reported ACEs exponentially increased children’s risk of poor school attendance, behavioral issues, and failure to meet grade-level standards in mathematics, reading, or writing.
- But these are all very general categories. So what exactly are the contributing factors to these statistics? What do we, as teachers, see in the classroom that leads to this?

Resources:
Effects on Cognitive Development

*Cognitive Development: the ways that children think, learn, process, reason, and abstract.*

- For children who have experienced trauma, much of their internal energy may be spent focused on survival, constantly scanning the environment for safety threats. Continuously experiencing the stress response forces bodies and minds to constantly race, leaving little time to practice important cognitive skills, and as a result, children who have been maltreated can have lower executive functioning skills compared to their non-maltreated peers.” (Statman-Weil, 2020, p. 58)

- Experiencing trauma can affect children’s understanding of…**sequencing and cause-and-effect** relationships. For most children this is the idea that “oh, if I cry, someone comes and comforts me.” But for children who have experienced maltreatment, this direct and discernible relationship between cause and effect isn’t there. Instead, it plays out more along the lines of “oh, if I cry, SOMETIMES someone might come and comfort me…or they might yell at me…or maybe no one comes at all.”

- Teachers may notice children who have a deficit in this area when they find a student who is seemingly unaffected or unable to pick up on traditional behavior management techniques. If a child does not have the cognitive skills necessary to understand cause and effect, these techniques will be meaningless at best.

- Trauma also affects **working memory**. When children have a deficit or delay in this area, the result is children who have trouble with things like multi-step instructions. This deficit is particularly noticeable in areas such as reading and math, but also in day to day instruction. For instance, consider the student who can never remember what they are supposed to do for their morning routine: they may remember the steps individually when prompted, but continuously fail to get through all of them.
- The behavior may be frustrating for teachers, but is not done by the student as an act of defiance. Instead, they simply lack the ability to hold all of the individual steps in their mind and therefore struggle to remember what to do without support.

- Trauma also affects **attentiveness**. Children who have experienced trauma may have a hard time focusing in the classroom due to overwhelming feelings of anxiety and fear. When children do not feel safe, it is impossible for them to focus on anything besides figuring out how to be safe.

- Additionally, trauma can affect a child’s capacity for **cognitive flexibility**. Cognitive flexibility is the ability to think about multiple things at once, and adapt behavior to different settings. For example, Shawn, a 5 year old at the Sarah Lawrence Early Childhood Center, had been planning to spend some of the free time in class to play a game of monsters with his friends. But when the time came, his friends instead wanted to play house and had no interest in playing monster. In response, Shawn became frustrated, complaining that playing house isn’t even fun (despite having enjoyed playing it before), and eventually removing himself to a different area to cry quietly.

- In this instance, Shawn is struggling with cognitive flexibility. He is unable to see beyond what he had originally planned to consider a different option, and instead he shuts down entirely.

- A deficit in cognitive flexibility can also affect reading, writing, and math skills:
  - In reading, children may interpret text too literally, struggle to pronounce words, and be resistant to corrections or even suggestions on either front.
  - Writing requires flexibility to be able to add details on the go, edit for errors, and add supporting sentences. If the child cannot think creatively or flexibly, this becomes an onerous task.
  - Math also requires flexible thinking as it involves adapting to information and looking for different strategies to solve a problem. If a child gets too fixated on a certain formula or thought process, math can present a challenge.

**Resources:**

Effects on Language Development

*Language is one of our primary modes of thinking, understanding, expressing, and communicating with our world.*

- Maltreatment in early childhood can result in comprehensive language deficits as well as more specific language difficulties that can interfere with learning as so much of the classroom environment is centered on language acquisition and expression through oral communication, reading, and writing.

- **Receptive language** is our ability to understand language in the form of words, sentences, gestures, and writing.
- When a child has experienced maltreatment early in life, they may find it difficult to understand social cues and body language, as understanding either is a matter of practice.
- If a child has not had consistent opportunities to practice communication, this skill may be delayed.
- Additionally, these children may also have difficulty understanding abstract language. For example, telling a student that it is “time to move on” could mean a multitude of things. As a result, instead of “moving on” the child might remain in place as they try to ascertain exactly what you meant. Alternatively, using more direct and concrete language such as “It is time to put what you are working on away in your folder” would be much clearer and require less interpretation.

- **Expressive Language** is our ability to communicate with others through words, sentences, body movements, and writing.
- Children who have experienced trauma may have difficulty with expressive language which in turn affects their ability to communicate and form relationships and connections.
Additionally, when children cannot properly express what they are feeling, they can instead become frustrated, confused, and sad as feelings of isolation seep in.

We see this in students all the time, even in our everyday interactions with students in a loud classroom, where a student repeats their question over and over only to eventually give up when their teacher can’t hear them.

For a student who is struggling with expressive language, this feeling of defeat when unable to communicate what they are trying so hard to convey is a frequent occurrence.

Overtime, the feeling of defeat can evolve into a general feeling of anxiety when it comes to communication—which only makes things harder for the child.

Resources:
Effects on Sensory Development

_Eight Senses: Visual, auditory, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, vestibular, proprioceptive, and interoceptive_

- Trauma can also impact a child’s sensory development leading to the child displaying either sensory-seeking or sensory-avoidant behaviors.

- When a child is _sensory-seeking_, they are craving stimuli; they may be extremely interested in movement, lights, colors, sounds, smells, and tastes.

- For example, consider Benjamin, a Pre-K student in a rural public school. During circle time he is bouncing around the room, touching everything he can get his hands on despite repeated redirection from the two teachers in the room.

- As a last resort, I was asked to take him down to the front office so that he could go for a walk and spend some time with an administrator that he likes there. Within 3 minutes of our arrival, we were quickly making our way back to the classroom as he had found his way into the Principal’s office and was playing on her computer.

- At other times Benjamin could be seen running through the room at top speed only to be brought to an abrupt halt by a table. However, he shows no sign of discomfort or injury despite the audible “thunk” as his body hit.

- He answers any phone that rings (be it the official classroom phone or even a personal cell phone) and could spend all day playing in the sink and splashing water everywhere.

- Benjamin is sensory-seeking. He is filling a need that his brain tells him is missing.

- Conversely, when a child is _sensory avoidant_, they will want to get away from certain stimuli or avoid them entirely—even stimuli that are necessary for basic everyday functioning.

- For example, Adam, a Kindergartener. Adam cannot wear hats in the winter due to the
- sensation of having something tight on his head. He has similar feelings towards socks, boots, or even wearing a jacket on top of his long-sleeve shirt—which is to say, he can’t stand them. In the winter, this has resulted in power struggles as his teacher wants him to have appropriate clothes to be outside, but Adam can’t stand wearing them to the point of having meltdowns if forced before he is ready.

- At lunch, Adam always eats the exact same mac and cheese, in the exact same container. His dad insists that it is the only thing he will eat.

- At his table, Adam often gets into disagreements with his peers as he attempts to assert physical boundaries in the space. He does not want anyone too close or too far in his space.

- Adam is sensory-avoidant. He is limiting the sensory input that he experiences as a way to keep himself calm. When he does experience what his brain perceives to be excess stimuli, he literally cannot cope and will go into a meltdown, either tearing off his clothes or hiding under a table.

Resources:
Effects on Social-Emotional Development

Social-Emotional Development: a set of skills that includes being able to identify emotions, regulate them, express empathy, and form relationships

- Trauma can also affect a child’s social-emotional development
- When a child experiences trauma, they may have trouble identifying their own feelings, taking the perspective of others, and displaying empathy.
- When children grow up in a emotionally or physically abusive household, they may not want to upset their caregivers and instead watch to see what feelings they are allowed to have and when.
- For example, in a household where the mother is emotionally unstable herself, if the child is sad or hurt, they may wait to assess what state their mother is in before seeking comfort or affection.
- As a result, the child loses the opportunity to practice understanding how they feel and processing their emotions, and without the capacity to fully understand and know themselves, they may have difficulty understanding the wants and needs of others.
- Trouble taking and understanding the perspective of others can also cause
  - Difficulty developing and expressing empathy
  - A deficit in the skills necessary to participate in social conversations where an understanding of others is expected
  - Difficulty extrapolating big ideas from texts.
- Children with a deficit in this area are often labeled “mean” or “manipulative” but in reality, they simply do not understand the emotions and motivations of others because they barely have had time to understand their own.

- Forming Relationships with peers and adults
- Children who have experienced early attachment disruptions or traumas often distrust
- others and feel the needs to keep themselves safe.
- They will often distance themselves from their classmates in a form of self-preservation, and may also be distrustful and suspicious of both teachers and children because they are expecting bad things to happen.

- **Curiosity** is one of the most important markers of childhood and learning, but for children who have experienced trauma, it can instead turn into a nerve-wracking endeavor.

- When children have healthy relationships and attachments, they venture out and explore knowing that they have the security and support of a trusted adult to return to.
- But for a child who has experienced trauma or maltreatment, whose caregivers presence was inconsistent, trying new things may make them feel of emotionally or physically unsafe. This child feels that they cannot trust that there will be emotional support if they get scared or hurt while venturing outside of their comfort zone.
- As a result, they do not take risks or explore. In class, the student may dismiss new activities or games as “boring” or “stupid.”
- For them, it is easier to reject a new activity than to show fear or vulnerability.

- **Play**
- In constructive play, children with trauma may struggle to think through what they want to build and then follow through constructing their vision. This process of completing a multistep activity may cause them to feel frustrated or overwhelmed.
- Children who have experienced trauma may also repeat scary experiences that they have had outside of school through dramatic imaginative play. While this is sometimes a form of processing, other times the child may become overwhelmed by the feelings that the play brings up, and often their play becomes more physically aggressive than that of their peers.
- Games that have clear winners or losers can be emotionally challenging for children who have experienced trauma. They may have difficulty regulating their feelings if they lose and feel as though the loss is an indication of their value or worth.

- So we can now see the vast effects of trauma in a child’s development. But given all of that information…

Resources:
How do we create a framework for addressing the needs of these students in the classroom?
So at this point, I would like to open us up to the most basic notion of trauma-informed teaching, and introduce the overarching goals and acknowledge some reservations that teachers may have about adopting them.
Trauma-Informed Approaches

**Realizing the widespread impact of trauma and pathways to recovery.**

**Recognizing traumas signs and symptoms**

**Responding by integrating knowledge about trauma into all facets of the system**

**Resisting re-traumatization of trauma-impacted individuals by decreasing the occurrence of unnecessary triggers and implementing trauma-informed procedures and practices.**

- According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, a school or classroom that is trauma-informed is one that is aiming to adhere to the “four R’s”:
  - Realizing the widespread impact of trauma and pathways to recovery
  - Recognizing traumas signs and symptoms
  - Responding by integrating knowledge about trauma into all facets of the system
  - Resisting re-traumatization of trauma-impacted individuals by decreasing the occurrence of unnecessary triggers and implementing trauma-informed procedures and practices.

- In essence, we acknowledge the impact that mental health can have across all major developmental domains (physical/health, cognitive/learning, behavioral, social/emotional) both inside and outside of the classroom, as well as how the classroom experience can influence mental health.

- Given that the relationship between mental health and academic achievement is highly correlated, a trauma-informed teacher then nurtures this relationship while still maintaining their primary focus on educational outcome.

Resources:
- Now understandably, given the sheer number of studies, new learning research, and new education strategies that teachers are bombarded with every year, it is only natural that trauma-informed teaching also comes under scrutiny.

- Based on both professional research and my own conversations with teachers, I have outlined a few of the most common concerns that teachers have raised about implementing trauma-informed strategies in their classrooms:
  
  - 1. The good of the many vs. the good of the few:
     - I found this to be the most commonly cited concern for many teachers. If we spend all of our energy adjusting our classroom to accommodate the needs of the students who have experienced traumas in their lives, what about the students who have not? Are they not just as deserving of our attention? What if by focusing on the few, we lose sight of the many?
  
  - 2. Limitations based on the scope of our practice.
    - As teachers, we are not therapists. Our degree programs do not teach us how to treat trauma in children. How are we supposed to help when we were not trained to do so?
    - Or even beyond that, if we are not trained in the treatment of childhood traumas, would we not be doing more harm than good by inserting ourselves where we were not meant to go?
  
  - 3. The lengths necessary to identify trauma.
    - This concern I found to be a combination of the first two. It is born of a concern over both time and training. How much time are teachers meant to devote to identifying cases of trauma and figuring out how to address them?
  
  - 4. Folie a deux or second-hand trauma.
- Perhaps a bit difficult to explain, but this concern is based in the well established idea that children love to imitate what they see.
- So, if we spend extended time in our classrooms discussing trauma, trying to seek it out in our students, and addressing it with them, wouldn’t we run the risk of other children who had no history of trauma, beginning to imitate what they see and perhaps even falsely believe that they do in fact have traumas?

- All of these concerns are both valid and understandable. If you are going to ask teachers to change how they manage their classrooms, you need to be ready with a good justification. And so with that in mind, I would like to introduce…
Curb-Cut Theory
Meet the needs of some to benefit the many

...Curb-Cut theory, or the idea that meeting the needs of some, benefits the many.
“Access for those denied is the goal. Access for everyone is the result.”

- Back in the 1970s, making your way through Berkeley California (or any American city) as a wheelchair user was no easy feat. While there was legislation in place to assure that government buildings were made universally accessible, the act of getting TO these buildings (and others) was still an arduous task due to the inaccessibility of roads and sidewalks. For most citizens, the four inch step that is a curb is easily surmounted, but for a wheelchair user, those few inches might as well have been a wall.
- In 1972, pressed by disability activists, the city of Berkeley installed its first official curb-cut.
- Hundreds more curb-cuts followed, then thousands upon thousands all across the country until, finally, in July of 1990, President George H.W. Bush signed the Americans with Disabilities Act, which prohibited disability-based discrimination and mandated changes to the built environment, including curb cuts.
- While initially intended to accommodate people in wheelchairs, once the curb cuts were in place, it became clear that everyone benefited from the accommodation: parents with strollers, workers with heavy carts, travelers with wheeled luggage, and even skateboarders had an easier time traversing because of the curb-cuts.
- So how does this apply to trauma-informed teaching?

Resources:
“The curb-cut effect underscores the foundational belief that we are one nation, that we rise or fall together. Without equity, there can be neither progress nor prosperity.”

- Well, there’s an ingrained societal notion that intentionally supporting one group inevitably hurts another (or that equity is a zero sum game).
  - This notion appears in teachers too; it manifests as the guilt many of us feel when we spend time attending to the needs of some of our students and fall short on the less urgent needs of others.
  - But this guilt that we feel over these moments is unwarranted. We do what we can with the time that we have, and in fact, curb-cut theory shows us that…
  - …when we target support where it is needed most—when we create the circumstances that allow those who have been left behind to participate and contribute fully—everyone wins.
- So with this in mind, I would like to move forward with a broad approach to trauma-informed teaching. An approach where we take strategies that are designed with only some children in mind, and apply them to all so that everyone can benefit.

Resources:
Implementing trauma-informed teaching through whole-classroom strategies.
“All children share the same inherent desires for safety, love, and connection. Any behaviors that counter these needs are adaptive strategies that come from children attempting to fulfill their unmet needs. To change the strategies they are using, we need to meet their needs; we need to lean into rather than away from them when behaviors get big or hard. By using relationship as the foundation of everything we do with children who have experienced trauma, we work to repair the hurt and pain that came before us and to offer a different perspective for ongoing hurt and pain.”

-Katie Statman-Weil

- As we consider whole-classroom strategies to support not only our children with traumas, but those without as well, I would like to read the following quote from Katie Statman-Weil to provide a frame of reference for how we will be approaching the problem.
- “All children share the same inherent desires for safety, love, and connection. Any behaviors that counter these needs are adaptive strategies that come from children attempting to fulfill their unmet needs. To change the strategies they are using, we need to meet their needs; we need to lean into rather than away from them when behaviors get big or hard. By using relationship as the foundation of everything we do with children who have experienced trauma, we work to repair the hurt and pain that came before us and to offer a different perspective for ongoing hurt and pain.”
- In the following slides I recommend classroom strategies to create a safe, trauma-informed space for children. Each of these strategies are beneficial to all children, but vital for children who have experienced trauma.
- By using whole-classroom strategies we are creating a system for ourselves as educators that is foundational. Where instead of putting out fires as they come up, we create a system that gives all of our students an environment where they have the greatest chance at success from the moment they walk in the door.

Resources:
Creating Safe Classrooms

Strategies to create a sense of safety in the classroom

- A trauma-responsive environment is both culturally responsive and constructive; the children must see themselves in the space to know that their voices and ideas matter.
- Teachers should consider the following strategies when looking to make their classroom a safe space:
  - **Look for Strengths**
    - It is easy as teachers to get caught up in our own feelings about the challenges that our students exhibit in a classroom.
    - When we reach this point, it is important to take a step back and remind ourselves about what the child does well; how do they connect with their peers? What are their special interests? What do they love to explore?
    - By noticing what children can do well, we can find ways to build on their strengths, rather than dwell on their deficits.
  - **Use culturally responsive practices**
    - It is important that the children in our class see themselves represented in their classroom. We need them to know that they are visible and that they matter, but most importantly that they belong.
    - To better understand our students, we need to acknowledge the different cultural, social, economic, and political backgrounds that they come from.
    - We must recognize our own cultural lens and biases and see how our personal experiences shape our expectations for behavior, our interactions with children, and our views about what learning looks and sounds like in the classroom.
    - And while all of this may sound very daunting, a first step is to consider the books that we read children and make accessible to them. In the ECC, my host
- teacher went through all of her books with us to demonstrate the array of people, cultures, families, and lives that she took great care to assure were presented in the books she read and made available to her students. Her books included children of color, LGBTQ families, topics of gender fluidity, religions from around the world, and more. When her year started, she took stock of each child in her class and made sure that they were represented in the literature she had.

- **Create a daily Rhythm**
  - When children have consistency, they know what to expect. This in turn can lessen some of their hypervigilance and allow them more space in their brain for other thoughts and activities.
  - Additionally, having a set daily rhythm shows children that when they do have big emotions or behaviors, they will not overpower or change the days activities.
  - This is especially helpful for setting boundaries and demonstrating to them that they are safe and the teachers are there to hold boundaries for them (which helps build a sense of trust).

- **Have clear and consistent expectations**
  - Similar to creating a daily rhythm, having clear and consistent boundaries also helps establish safe boundaries for children to exist in.
  - When our expectations are clear from the start and do not change, a child knows what to expect and knows that they can rely on what you said to be the case. This removes a lot of the anxiety or guesswork for them.
  - Now, this isn’t to say that you set an expectation that everyone writes a poem by the end of the class period and hold to that. As teachers, we must anticipate exceptions to our expectations and tailor them preemptively.
  - For example, instead of saying that everyone must finish a poem by the end of the class period, we might instead say that everyone will finish a poem either independently, or with the help of a teacher.
  - This allows for students who need more time to have it (maintaining the expectation that a poem simply will be finished, regardless of when) and allow you to support students who are struggling, all within the bounds of the original expectation.

Resources:
Creating Safe Classrooms

*Strategies to create a sense of safety in the classroom*

- Be Mindful of Transitions

- Find ways to reduce transitions
- Teach the expectations of transitions
- Use similar phrases or songs during transitions to create rhythm and ritual
- Make transitions fun
- Keep transitions short
- Stay close and offer guidance
- Be an external regulator
- Allow for transitional objects

- For many children who have experienced trauma, transitions present a particular challenge.
- Children who have experienced neglect or abuse have often experienced multiple losses (such as a caregiver, toys, friends, food, and more).
- When we transition from one activity to another, these same feelings of loss can come up as a transition requires a child to give up something that they are enjoying to gain something unknown.
- To support children who have experienced trauma in learning to manage their feelings during transitions, we can consider the following strategies:

  - **Find ways to reduce transitions**
    - Perhaps not possible to everyone, and that is ok. But it never hurts to take time to look at your schedule, and see if there are areas where activities can be combined to create longer chunks of time with less transitions

  - **Teach the expectations of transitions**
    - We cannot assume that children know how or why a transition is taking place (let alone what we expect them to do for it).
    - To give our students the best chance of success, teachers should place emphasis early in the school year on modeling how transitions look, giving students the opportunity to model and practice for themselves, and providing visual cues as reminders of both the steps expected in a transition, as well as where to place certain items that need to be put away.
    - For example, in the ECC all block shelves have a picture of which block shape goes in each particular area. This help students know exactly where items need to go without necessitating full memorization of the shelves layout.
Then, in my second grade placement this year, my host teacher had created silent visual cues for packing up at the end of the day: holding up one finger meant that students were to put all of their materials away in their bins and close them up. Holding up two fingers meant that students were to pull out their book baggies, place their bins on their chairs, and wait behind their chairs until they were called to get their backpack.

With the visual cues, a transition that is chaotic in many classrooms, becomes smooth and streamlined for everyone.

Additionally, we can use similar phrases or songs during transitions to create rhythm and ritual. Such as a clean up song or bell or chime that indicates it is time to stop work.

For younger age groups, teachers can make transitions fun with the addition of small games or activities. For example: playing a game of I Spy to pick which students can go to their cubbies to get their things. As the students wait, the teacher might say “I spy someone wearing a blue and white striped shirt” or “I spy two people wearing jeans”. This breaks up the movement as children go to and from cubbies and also gives students something else to focus on to keep them occupied as they wait for their turn.

Keep transitions short. When a child who has experienced trauma is struggling with a transition, making the transition quick will make it more likely that the child will feel successful and proud that they made it through to the next enjoyable activity.

Stay close and offer guidance. When a child has a particularly difficult time with transitions, it may be helpful to offer them support before, during, and after the transition. This can be done by giving them a quick and private warning that a transition is going to occur, such as “In 5 minutes it will be time to clean up for circle time. Is there a last thing you want to do before it is cleanup time?”

Be an external regulator. If transitions are simply too much or too challenging for a child, you may need to stay with them through the transition and model and coach them through each step in the process. By supporting them through transitions in this way, they learn that transitions can go well and they can feel safe, setting them up for independence as time goes on.

Allow for transitional objects. While this is normally something seen more in younger age groups, transitional objects can apply to even older elementary students as well. Take Lisa, a 5th grader who has moderate to severe anxiety. When she is anxious in class, she has an array of putty, cloud slimes, and other fidgets that she pulls that help her regulate. When we go from an activity that she enjoys to one that she finds more taxing, she uses her fidgets to help her reset and regulate after the transition. By allowing Lisa to have this object, her teachers are giving her a tool that
- increases her chance of successful and independent regulation.

Resources:
- Children need to feel competent and have some ownership over their own lives and as educators, we want to support this feeling of empowerment in our classrooms.
- Some strategies for this include…
  - **Encouraging leadership**
    - We want to help children feel empowered to take on leadership roles which can in turn counteract some of the helplessness that can occur from experiencing trauma.
    - In our classrooms, we can consider exploring books, themes, and movements where individuals or communities had to overcome hardship or fight for privileges.
    - By making room for these themes in our classrooms, we encourage children to stand up in a positive way for what they believe in.
  - **Allow time for play**
    - As I mentioned before, play for children with trauma can be fraught with triggers, but that does not mean that we should deprive them of it.
    - Play is an important part of social, emotional, physical, intellectual, and psychological development. It allows children to construct knowledge and make meaning of the world around them, and through play children can learn to thoughtfully plan, problem solve, compromise, take risks, self-regulate, and begin to have a deeper understanding of their own lives and the lives of others.
    - So play is a critical tool for children as they continue to grow and develop their sense of self.
    - When addressing play for children who have experienced trauma, we need to recognize that their lives are full of chaos and unpredictable behavior, which
means that that is what they will likely bring to their play.
- So as they explore, they may need an adult to model healthy, enjoyable play activities.
- As teachers, we can also help by providing a myriad of play experiences, such as costumes and props that support different play scenarios (in addition to offering our support when things go awry).
- Play is a skill just like any other. As educators, we need to encourage the healthy development and exploration of play for all of our children.

- **Hold high expectations**
  - While it is important to be aware of the individual differences and needs of our students, it is also important that we continue to hold them to high standards
  - For the children who need it, we offer choices and scaffold their growth and development while also ensuring that they are participating fully in the classroom community.
  - Our students need to see that we believe in them and what they are capable of so that they can learn to believe in themselves.

- **Create a proactive environment**
  - To support children who have experienced trauma, we must create proactive rather than reactive classrooms. We must work to teach the important social-emotional skills they need to be successful in the social and academic contexts of school.
  - We should model how to regulate emotions by discussing our own feelings; notice and identify the feelings of the children in our class as they occur; use visuals to support children in recognizing both their own feelings, as well as the emotional cues of others.
  - For example: “I am noticing you are both giggling and smiling. You seem very happy to be playing together.” or “I see tears are coming down your cheeks. You look very sad”
  - In both these instances we identify cues and provide vocabulary for children (for both positive and negative emotions). By doing so, we are giving our students tools for their own social-emotional development and knowledge.

Resources:
Supporting Empowerment

Strategies to support children’s sense of empowerment in the classroom

Steps for Offering Choices:
1. Assess what you want the child to do. Consider *is this really a choice? Do I understand and respect the child’s point of view?*
2. Tell the child, without judgement, “You have a choice.”
3. Provide two positive choices that both support the child in completing the task at hand.
4. Ask the child “What do you choose?” and provide them with a moment to think and respond.
5. Repeat the child’s decision back to them in a positive and affirming manner “You chose ___! Great!”

- Choices also allow children a sense of control and can help us avoid power struggles
- When children are having a hard time regulating and remaining calm in the classroom, it is easy to get stuck in the “no” rut: “No hitting!” “No talking!” “No roughhousing!” But often children need explicit descriptions of what they *can* do instead.
- So here are some steps for offering choices to children:
  - Assess what you want the child to do. Consider *is this really a choice? Do I understand and respect the child’s point of view?*
  - Tell the child, without judgement, “You have a choice.”
  - Provide two positive choices that both support the child in completing the task at hand.
  - Ask the child “What do you choose?” and provide them with a moment to think and respond.
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Resources:
Supporting Empowerment

*Note: It may also be important to acknowledge when the child wants something else.

Example:
“I know that you really want to continue building your block tower and we still need to clean up for lunch. Would you like to clean up the wooden blocks first or the colorful blocks? You can decide.”

- It may also be important to acknowledge when the child wants something else.
- When acknowledging what the child wants, make sure to not place your wants in opposition to theirs.
- So instead of saying “I know that you really want ‘A’, BUT, we need to do B”, say “I know you really want to do ‘A’, AND we need to do ‘B’” and then provide a choice for how to do B.
- While you do not have to engage in a debate about the importance of B over A, it helps to acknowledge that you see the child and understand what they want (even if it is not one of the options you are going to be providing them with).
- For example:
  - “I know that you really want to continue building your block tower AND we still need to clean up for lunch. Would you like to clean up the wooden blocks first or the colorful blocks? You can decide.”

Resources:
Establishing Trust

Strategies to support the establishment of trust in the classroom

- **Ask Questions and be Non-judgemental**
  - When addressing children and exploring behaviors that they have, we want to be sure to use non-judgemental language.
  - For example, “You’re being sneaky” is judgemental, whereas “I see you are leaving the table with Jennifer’s cookie” is simply a statement of fact that can be said with a tone of curiosity.
  - When we express curiosity about a child’s intentions we can ask questions that allow us to learn more about their fears, needs, and wants, which in turn helps us better understand them as an individual and will enable us to help them on a more proactive level in the future.

- **Follow Through**
  - When we tell a student that we are going to do something, it is important that we make every reasonable effort to follow through.
  - Children who have experienced trauma are used to frequent disappointment and adults going back on promises.
  - To establish trust, we must always try to follow through on the commitments and promises that we make.
  - And when we can’t, we need to take time to check in with the child and explain the reasoning as to why we were unable to.

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  - When we tell a student that we are going to do something, it is important that we make every reasonable effort to follow through.
  - Children who have experienced trauma are used to frequent disappointment and adults going back on promises.
  - To establish trust, we must always try to follow through on the commitments and promises that we make.
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- **Acknowledge our own mistakes**
  - As human beings, we all make mistakes. As teachers, it is important that we model for our students that it is ok and safe to acknowledge and take responsibility for our mistakes, and then model apologizing.
  - In this way, young children who experience fear or anxiety when they make mistakes, can see that nothing bad or scary is going to happen, and that what matters most is how we repair and move on from our mistakes.

- **Always work on connection**
  - To show children who have had unpredictable or inconsistent early lives that our classrooms are different, we must always work on connection rather than correction.
  - As students arrive in the beginning of the day, take time to ask them questions about their morning or the evening before. Take time to listen to their answers to show the child that your interest is genuine (and accept that you may not get to every student every day).
  - If you can, spend time with children during meals and ask them about how their day is going or what they are eating.
  - We want our relationships with students to be authentic. When we take time to connect with children throughout the day, they learn that they are always seen and that our care is not limited to a certain time in the day.

Resources:
Design a Thoughtful Classroom Space

Areas to consider when designing your classroom space

- **Quiet and calm spaces**
  - Designated spaces for rest, or quiet time where students can go to spend time either alone or with one or two others.
  - Offering students this space allows them the opportunity to learn to regulate their own needs
- **A space that reflects the children**
  - Students should know that the classroom is just as much their space as it is ours.
  - You can place student work around the room, have books that reflect the diversity of the class, have toys or decorations that were picked or made by the students on display
  - Pictures of students taken in the classroom (perhaps during a special project or event) can be placed to make the room feel more reminiscent of a home
  - Students can also have a particular binder, folder, or notebook that they decorate with pictures from home, pictures of things they love that can be printed at school, stickers, anything that allows them to show who they are and what they value
- **Spaces that are free of clutter**
  - Disorganization and clutter can be overwhelming for all children, but especially those who have experienced trauma.
  - Having a classroom that is organized and clutter free can help create a sense of calm when other aspects of a child’s life feel chaotic
- **Spaces that do not overload the senses**
  - Elementary classrooms are often full of bright colors, busy bulletin boards,
- and colorful posters.
- While we want to make sure that our environment is appealing to our students, we also don’t want it to be overwhelming.
- Choosing a singular color as a theme, or choosing calm colors and keeping the space simple can allow children to focus on connection with each other and with their teachers.

**Spaces that invite exploration and creativity**
- Teachers may also consider having a singular designated space that changes based on student interest, curriculum, etc.
- This allows for children’s interests to be reflected and for new opportunities for exploration and creativity to be available, without creating big changes in the classroom that can otherwise be disorienting.
- For example: younger age groups might see this space change between art easels, a water table, or tower building, and older age groups might see this space change to accommodate robots, newspaper writing, or even origami.

**Incorporating natural elements to make the space feel open**
- Connection to the natural world is deeply important for healthy development.
- Incorporating plants or other elements of nature into our classrooms can help ground students, and make the space seem more open like the natural world.

- All of these and more are examples of ways that we as teachers can build a foundation that helps proactively combat the effects of ACEs in our students, as well as meet the needs of our whole class.

Resources:
“The greatest hope for traumatized, abused, and neglected children is to receive a good education in schools where they are seen and known, where they learn to regulate themselves, and where they can develop a sense of agency. At their best, schools can function as islands of safety in a chaotic world. They can teach children how their bodies and brains work and how they can understand and deal with their emotions. Schools can play a significant role in instilling the resilience necessary to deal with the traumas of neighborhoods or families.”

-Bessel van der Kolk

- And as we consider the unique position we are in as teachers and educators to help our students through even the darkest of times, I would like to close with the following quote by Bessel van der Kolk, who I believe put it best when he said:

- “The greatest hope for traumatized, abused, and neglected children is to receive a good education in schools where they are seen and known, where they learn to regulate themselves, and where they can develop a sense of agency. At their best, schools can function as islands of safety in a chaotic world. They can teach children how their bodies and brains work and how they can understand and deal with their emotions. Schools can play a significant role in instilling the resilience necessary to deal with the traumas of neighborhoods or families.”

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