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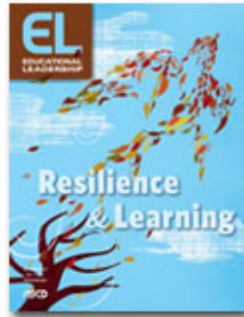

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Staying Connected with Troubled Students

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When students come to school with significant emotional burdens, educators must call on their empathy to maintain consistent, caring relationships.

Melissa, a 3rd grader, has just been moved from one foster placement to another. She comes to school and notices that the seats in her classroom have been rearranged. As she makes her way to her desk, she mumbles under her breath about her stupid new seat. She sits down and puts her head on the desk with her hood pulled up. After a few minutes, she stands up and angrily flips over her desk, cursing. It's the fifth time this week that she's yelled at the teacher. And it's only Tuesday.

Both the student and the teacher are in a quandary here. Melissa is attempting to communicate her needs but is doing so in a way that is unlikely to get those needs met. Her teacher has to correct Melissa's challenging behavior with little information about its cause. As clinicians who have worked in schools for more than 20 years, we've observed that the response from school staff in situations like this one plays a major role in shaping students' resilience in the classroom.

Every day, many students come to school burdened by the effects of trauma and loss. Some students have had a tough start (early neglect, abuse, separation from primary caregivers). Others are experiencing ongoing and pervasive stress (domestic violence, grief over loss of a parent, chronic poverty, exposure to violence). Regardless of origin, these experiences leave some students feeling frightened, guarded, and unavailable for learning. Such students don't feel that the wworld is safe. They are on high alert, scanning the environment for cues that they're in danger. Their fight-or-flight response is overactive. They're quick to react or hide, to push away gestures of good will, and to give up (Geddes, 2006).

For students who enter the classroom with significant emotional burdens, consistent, caring relationships can be powerful and curative—yet these students often struggle to build such relationships. Schools can help by creating a framework for responding to emotionally struggling students in ways that are not punitive, but that encourage connection and foster resilience.

It's All About Relationships

Healthy relationships promote curiosity and learning. Securely attached kids—those who have had generally consistent, predictable, and caring responses from their caregivers—are usually good at building relationships in

school. They can adapt to different teacher styles, are unthreatened by change and inevitable inconsistencies, and know that most teachers are doing their best. These students bring out teachers' natural strengths. In contrast, students with provocative, challenging behavior can make even the most dedicated teacher feel disrespected and ineffective.

Relationship building starts with empathetic listening—the ability to tune in to what the other person is actually saying instead of what we want to hear (Siegel & Hartzell, 2003). Teachers who are empathetic listeners consider the student's point of view without neglecting their own.

Empathetic listening can be developed and practiced. It starts with being attuned—being aware of the changing needs, feelings, and states of another person, and shifting our response accordingly (Perry, 2013). For example, good parents respond to their baby's subtle changes in voice, tone, body language, and facial expression, shifting their own verbal and nonverbal responses to match. With such attunement, the baby feels understood (Stern, 1983).

Bruce Perry (2013), a psychiatrist who studies brain development in traumatized children, asserts that attunement and relationship building are at the heart of good teaching. Teachers who are flexible—who can shift their responses depending on the emotional needs of their students—are much more likely to be successful with kids who are difficult to reach. Remember that being flexible does not mean having loose classroom structures; in fact, students with trauma and attachment issues require consistent and predictable structures to feel safe. Attunement means looking moment to moment at how a student feels, zeroing in on the meaning behind his or her behavior, and responding in ways that will keep the student engaged and make him or her feel understood.

Teachers can't be attuned at all times to the needs, motivations, and feelings of a classroom full of kids. But they *can* adopt a stance that encourages attuned responses.

What Are Attuned Responses?

Consider again Melissa, the 3rd grader who reacted angrily to the change in seat assignments after she had just been moved from one foster placement to another. What could the teacher do to attune to a student like Melissa?

When aggressive behavior occurs, it may seem to come out of nowhere, but there are subtle cues that can prompt us to respond early, before the behavior escalates. Teachers can notice the first hints of agitation in the student's face, his or her body language, or the volume and intensity of his or her speech and intervene before behavior gets out of hand.

If the student is speaking with intensity, speak back with matched intensity that communicates understanding: "I see you look angry. I heard you saying you didn't like your new seat. I know that I surprised you by changing things. Let me explain to you how I made the decision to move seats around."

If the student's head is down, you might talk softly to match his or her withdrawn state: "Your head has been down on your desk for a few minutes. I get the feeling you might be upset about your new desk. Would you be willing to talk with me for a few minutes? You can keep your hood on until you are ready to take it off; I can see that this is really hard for you."

Teachers should also be aware of the typical challenges for children with trauma, loss, and attachment difficulties. These include unexpected changes, transitions of any kind, and the sense that adults do not understand (Minahan & Rappaport, 2012). Preparing kids early for changes—giving them an alert—goes a long way: "I wanted to tell you that I'm going to change our classroom seats. When you come in tomorrow, your seat will be over by the window. Let's go take a look at your new desk now."

Another important approach is for teachers to show proactive, specific interest in their students—for example, by asking students about their interests, talents, favorite lunch, or what music they like. That way, when a difficult situation occurs, the teacher has banked good experiences and the relationship is better able to tolerate the difficulty (Pianta, 1999).

Teachers may think that with curriculum demands, they don't have enough extra time to get to know students on a personal level. But attuned relationship building doesn't require much extra time. Instead, teachers can be intentional about building personal material into the curriculum. For example, if students are reading a book about a child without friends, the teacher might ask them to write about what it would be like to have no friends. It's amazing how much students may tell us about themselves through their work.

Staying on PACE

The principles of attunement described here are also embedded in the work of clinical psychologist Daniel Hughes (2007), who developed PACE (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, and Empathy), an attachment-focused family therapy model that can be applied to the relationships between educators and students. Before responding to problem behavior by setting limits and introducing behavioral interventions, teachers should work from a stance of PACE.

Playfulness. Some kids can tolerate a playful stance better than a deeply empathetic stance. Becoming more lighthearted can reduce the intensity of the moment. For example, "I think you wish I would go ahead and move my desk instead of asking you to move yours! Can you imagine if the teacher's desk was placed right in the middle of class? How would you ever goof off without me noticing?"

Acceptance. Many students with difficult behaviors feel shame—they believe that as a result of their bad behavior, *they* are bad (Hughes, 2007). Make it clear that you accept the student's feelings and thoughts, even though you do not accept all of his or her behaviors. For example, "I know this seat change has really made you angry and that you think it was a dumb idea. I don't think you should have thrown over the desk, but I do recognize that you're angry."

Curiosity. Ask questions with real openness to discovering something different from what you assume to be true: "I wonder what it was that made you so angry this morning. I've switched the desks before and you haven't lost control. Did something happen on the bus? At home? Are you worried about something that we don't understand yet?"

Empathy. Strive to understand the experience of the student: "It must be so hard for you when something unexpected happens."

PACE requires that adults approach *all* behavior, even behavior that is disruptive or destructive, with a sense of openness. But for this to happen, teachers must feel that their own needs are met and that they are supported in challenging moments.

Administrator Support Counts

Being kind and attentive to students, especially following aggressive behavior, can be tough. To help school staff respond effectively, administrators must take good care of their teachers and establish what the British psychoanalyst John Bowlby (1988) termed a *secure base* by responding to their teachers' successes *and* difficulties with openness. In a time when teachers are often evaluated by test scores, it can be daunting for them to ask for help with a difficult student or to acknowledge that a student has exhausted their emotional resources or intervention ideas.

Asking for help from administrators is especially hard when student behavior has chipped away at a teacher's confidence. With repeated bad experiences, a stressed educator may begin to think, "I'm a bad teacher. I can't keep this class together!" Without room to address those feelings, some teachers will turn their angry feelings toward the students who have caused a disruption: "You're the problem. I have 25 other students willing to learn. You need to leave."

Keeping these obstacles in mind, how can administrators help teachers stay connected to tough kids? First, administrators should take it seriously when a teacher feels threatened or upset by student behavior. School staff members need to know that if they share negative feelings with an administrator, they will not be blamed and their evaluations will not be compromised. They may need safe and confidential spaces (separate from administration —perhaps the guidance staff or outside clinical consultants) to talk about troubling kids. If adults can acknowledge their sense of betrayal and anger at students and reach out to a safe person, they will build stamina to repair the relationship with the student.

It's also important for administrators to bank good experiences with teachers so that the relationship is strong when hard times occur. To improve relationships in school, administrators might try such ideas as setting aside time during each staff meeting for teachers to validate one another or starting special-interest groups like a weekly running club or a regular after-school gathering at a coffee shop.

Breaks and Repairs

Even with the tightest prevention and intervention plans, teachers encounter difficulties with students. It's helpful to remember (and to remind students) that breaks and repairs are a natural part of all relationships (Hughes, 2007; Siegel & Hartzell, 2003). The hard part is figuring out how to mend relationships so that attention can return to the learning process. Here are some guidelines:

- The adult is responsible for initiating the repair, even if the kid did the deed.
- When designing opportunities for repair, consider the student's strengths and weaknesses. Just as you can't expect a 1st grader to complete 12th grade math, you can't expect a child who struggles with empathy and perspective taking (common deficits for children with trauma and attachment problems) to apologize until you've heard and understood his or her perspective. Remember that troubled children feel and act much younger when they are in distress.
- When kids won't talk, tell them how you perceive the problem in a caring and curious way that invites them to react to your perception.
- Don't isolate kids. When they are alone in a time-out area or in the back of the classroom, they're only thinking how unfair and mean you are. However, note that some kids benefit from having space or quiet time. If you observe that a student does better with quiet time before talking, explain that you'll give him or her a few minutes

to calm down. Be clear that you are not mad at the student and are not punishing him or her through isolation.
- Don't hold grudges—it can make a kid feel terrible. Kids who become disengaged from school are quick to say that their teachers or administrators hate them.
- Make repairs aimed at building community: Have the student make a poster to brighten up the room, help you lead the class in a respectful way down the hall, be responsible for passing out papers, or read to a younger group of kids.

One of us, Allison, worked for years at a residential treatment program for troubled teens. A 16-year-old girl, Tammy, had serious difficulty managing her anger. She was sullen and withdrawn most of the time, but when she felt threatened she was quick to become enraged. Several weeks into the program, Tammy assaulted a staff person who had asked her to return to class before she felt ready. Staff members were hurt, confused, and angry. During the repair process, we made several mistakes that became fodder for learning:

- We asked Tammy to write an apology. She refused. She didn't feel remorseful. She felt justified in her action. She was defending herself.
- We asked Tammy to discuss what happened and to take ownership of her behavior. She wouldn't. She didn't have the skills for that kind of back-and-forth dialogue. She lacked the ability to put herself in someone else's shoes.
- We tried suspending Tammy from the program for a day. She came back looking and feeling the same: resentful, guarded, and blaming the staff for her choices. When they are left alone with no one to mediate their experience, children with trauma and attachment problems tend to stew in their anger at others. They fill in the silence with their original perceptions of themselves as unworthy and unlovable (Hughes, 2007).

In the end, we asked Tammy to copy the guidelines about assault from a state website onto a poster board and present her work to a group of students. She was instantly cooperative and diligent in her efforts. This repair worked because we stepped away from our immediate need for an apology and found a way to help Tammy feel competent. A few days later, she slipped an apology note to the person she had hurt. When we figured out what she could do, Tammy became more invested in working things out. She felt heard.

This example shows that as teachers, we won't always know in advance what a student needs. But we *can* make educated guesses that are strengthened by strong attunement with the student. One way to know whether you are making a good intervention decision is to become aware of your own reactivity: If you feel the need to demand that a kid does something ("She should apologize"), ask yourself whether you're reacting to your own feelings or to the student's needs. A better gauge of how to respond is to ask, What kind of intervention will allow this student to learn from his or her mistake and to save face? (Less shame, more gain.)

Repairing a relationship with a student sends a powerful message about working through problems, persisting, and bouncing back—all elements of resilience. When you get through hard times with kids, they can be incredibly grateful that you didn't give up on them. This is true for all kids, but particularly for kids with trauma and attachment difficulties.

Adjust Your Sails

A Yiddish proverb says, "You can't control the wind, but you can adjust your sails." Educators can't control the trauma and stress that students may bring to school, but they can consider their reactions to students, better attune their responses to student needs, and foster emotional resilience and healing that will improve education outcomes.

Authors' note: All names are pseudonyms.

Video Bonus

A student and his parents share their views on his behavior, the importance of empathy, and how teachers can help.

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