

# Trauma-Sensitive Teachers

## TRAUMA SENSITIVE TOOL

### Memory

We saw in the video three important types of memory and we understand that they are impacted by trauma. More importantly, we found out that students who struggle with these memory issues are often mislabeled as rude, defiant, or unmotivated (or even worse.) The problem with these labels is that it takes the locus of control out of our hands and puts it in the hands of the students while we stand helpless. When we correctly label the challenge as deficit we reclaim the power to teach to students that are able to learn successfully.

#### Correctly Label the Deficit

Ask yourself:

# 01

### What issues with memory/learning am I seeing?

- In the video, we saw three types of memory: explicit, sequential, and working memory. Some of your students may struggle with one type of memory or all three.
- A child who struggles with explicit memory may seem to wake up in a whole new world every day. They may not remember that every day they come to class and sit down. They may frequently appear agitated or lost or they might clown around to cover up the fact they have no idea what to do.
- A child who struggles with sequential memory might struggle the most academically. This may be most obvious when it is difficult to remember steps to solving a math problem, the order of letters in spelling a word, the sequence of events in a story (think: What happened next?) This child might be frustrated about doing homework because when he does it, he can't remember anything about it. Then, we as teachers may misread this lack of understanding as being unprepared or even dishonest about doing the homework.
- A child who struggles with working memory is going to have the most trouble with social situations. He may not know to take turns or understand how to leave gracefully when he has had enough play. He might misread when other students ask him to play it is because they want to make friends with him. He may treat other students in the way he was treated (unfortunately that is sometimes violently or rudely). A child who struggles with working memory likely did not develop a good sense of cause and effect because his needs were not met. This child will not respond well to consequences or sticker charts/reward systems.

# 02

## What Impact of Trauma is causing the issue?

- Often the trauma issue is due to delayed brain development. Sometimes the constant state of confusion and shame causes increased anxiety and heart rate. This puts the child in a “survival” mode and makes any type of learning challenging. In order to learn, you have to get the cerebral cortex online and that usually happens when children feel comfortable and have a safe relationship with you.

# 03

## What can I do to teach it?

- **Differentiate your expectations for each student.**  
In order for them to have a reasonable expectation of success. Students will give up if the expectations are too high this is why you don't start a new video game at the highest level, you start at your level and work your way up. Some kids can work independently, others cannot...yet. Be prepared to help them until they can.
- **Stop asking so many questions.**  
Questions are a huge anxiety trigger and students from trauma backgrounds will often give you the answer they think you want to hear because that is the survival response. Rather than say “Did you do your homework?” say “Get out the homework from the blue folder and set it on your desk.” Rather than say “Why are you so wiggly today?” say “I need you to settle your bodies and relax your shoulders.”
- **Have visual reminders and color code when possible.**  
Post these things for everyone to see, but if you notice that a particular student is struggling, you may put a smaller list on an index card and tape it inside a folder. Some teachers use their fingers to count out 5 steps or five rules.
- **Use music, rhyming, or rhythm.**  
Mnemonic devices are helpful for all students; keep them short and incorporate music to reinforce those memory pathways.
- **Practice memory games without stressors.**  
Classic memory games where you flip over a picture and try to remember where the matching picture is and flip over that card are games that can be played at home or with other students. Simple nursery rhymes teach a lot of memorization skills, even memorizing the lyrics to songs show that memory is developing. Simple flash cards well below their current level will allow the student to experience success and form new brain wiring to associate memory with success.

- **Mindfulness breathing and heart rate.**

Simply put, students who are stressed cannot learn. Some researchers go so far as to say that if an individual has a heart rate above 90, they cannot engage their cerebral cortex. The best way is to avoid getting the heart rate above 90, but if you see a student is stressed it will be beneficial to help them co-regulate so that learning is possible. There are apps available to help that have short videos that encourage mindful breathing. Some schools use Mind Yeti, iPad Breathe. Some teachers use “How is Your engine running? Red (angry explosive), Yellow (anxious- uncomfortable), Green (Good ready to learn), and Blue (sad or sleepy) to help students recognize their feelings and take steps to manage them. You can also purchase BIODOTS that are stick on dots that work like a mood ring and can be used as a biofeedback technique to help student monitor their anxiety/stress level and use strategies to calm themselves until the biodot changes color.

# 04

## Where do I start?

- Start by identifying memory struggles as an impact of trauma. Focus on one or two students. Then, try one of the easier strategies for helping. Next week you will receive a fun way to get caregivers and families involved in working on memory and emotions at the same time.



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