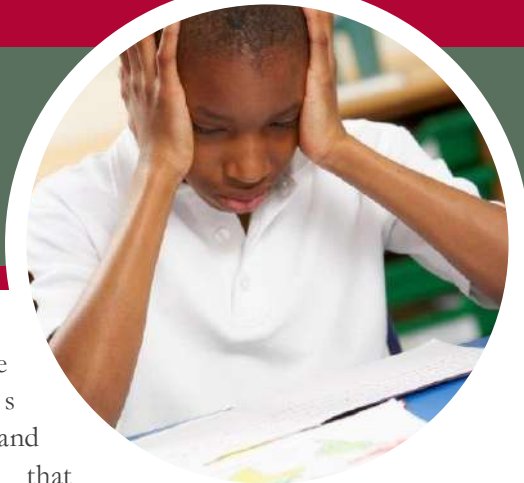


If Not a Sticker Chart, Then What?



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A “Understanding how childhood trauma impacts students in schools is important, but what do we do about student behavior if we do not use a behavior or sticker chart?” It’s a question that educators and parents often ask when learning about creating trauma-sensitive schools.

First of all, behavior or sticker charts do work for some students, some of the time, so we do not necessarily have to throw them out completely. For traumatized students, however, those interventions often do not work. Here is why.

As Dr. Daniel Siegel has described, some misbehavior we see from students is a result of activity from the upstairs brain (i.e., an upstairs brain temper tantrum). An example might be a child who at a particular moment in time is able to regulate her internal state - think “big emotions” - but simply does not want to do what is expected by trusted adults because they have their own agenda at the moment and are making a choice. It is a *won’t* behavior. Saying, “No,” with clear limits, boundaries and even using typical behavior modification interventions may be helpful. The problem comes in when we view all behavior as *won’t* behavior when it is not.

Some student behavior, particularly with traumatized youth, stems from what Siegel calls the dys-regulated downstairs brain and not the upstairs brain. For reasons unique to each child, these kiddos are often triggered into a flight, fight or freeze response associated with the dys-regulated downstairs brain. Behaviors may accompany this dys-regulated arousal state, but they represent “can’t” behavior, not “won’t” behavior. This is true even when behaviors look very much like “won’t” behaviors.

For instance, the traumatized teen who says, “I’m not doing it; you can’t make me,” may appear to be engaging in “won’t” behavior when in reality, he/she was triggered by perceived rejection from peers before school started and is overwhelmed by feelings of shame, hurt and fear. These feelings may remind and tap into the student’s

intense emotions of shame and rejection that are related to past abusive experiences. Because of the triggered flight, fight or freeze response, the student truly “can’t” stay calm, “can’t” use his/her upstairs brain to make a better choice and needs help to regulate his/her body and brain. Instead of thinking about how to consequence these youth so they “learn a lesson” about not engaging in such behavior, we need to help them learn how to regulate their big feelings so behavioral escalations can be prevented in the future. This learning requires positive, trusting relationships with adults as well as practice at regulating arousal states.

Let’s face it, this is not only true for traumatized youth. All of us, adults and youth alike, become overwhelmed with stress at times and lose our capacity to regulate our downstairs brain. We each need relationships we can rely on when we become overwhelmed with big emotions. We also need help and practice to learn how to regulate our stress response systems. The difference is that many traumatized youth were never able to develop their capacity for emotional regulation in the first place so their brains and bodies are learning it for the first time. The rest of us simply lose that capacity when our stress level rises too high. Either way, students need practice when it comes to regulating their stress response systems.

So how do we help them do that?

Here are a few ideas:

- 1. Build positive relationships with students and be present.** Notice their escalating arousal states as early as possible because it is easier to help a child soothe a slightly dys-regulated brain than a severely dys-regulated brain. “Be with” students when this happens by approaching, sitting quietly with them on their level and saying nothing at all or something simple like, “I’m not mad kiddo, breathe.” That



line represents a strategy I learned during ATN's 2014 educational summit from Jody McVittie.

2. **Teach all children about the brain's stress response system and Dr. Daniel Siegel's hand model of the brain.** Check out our Hansen Elementary's "Mindfulness" video to see what students can learn about the workings of emotional regulation. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mkNMjiBpDjE>)
3. **Build in regulatory breaks throughout the school day for all children and even more for traumatized children.** Importantly, provide these breaks before children look like they need them. This builds the brain's capacity for regulation. Examples include brain breaks, mindfulness practice and yoga.
4. **Develop individualized plans for severely traumatized students whereby students, staff and parents work together to figure out what helps a particular child calm his/her stress response system.** For example, a student may benefit from a calming area in the classroom where he/she can hold a stuffie, listen to music, rock in a rocking chair or even run his/her hands through a box of sand for a few minutes. Another may need a walk with a trusted adult to regulate. Figure out what works for each child, and make a plan about how the student or educator can initiate that plan when escalations occur. Utilizing an "I need a break in the calming area" card can be helpful so that the student does not have to verbalize what he/she needs but instead, can simply hand a teacher the card. Putting our needs into words is difficult for all of us when our stress response systems are activated, and it is especially difficult for traumatized youth.
5. **When behavior does escalate, help the child or teen regulate first.** Then later, help the child make up for his/her behavior by doing something that helps fix the situation or repairs any now disconnected relationships. Natural and logical consequences are essential, but apologies of actions must not be overlooked. As much as possible, encourage students to come up with ideas about how they can make the situation better. Anyone

who feels hurt or disrespected as a result of the student's actions can verbalize what would help them to feel better as well. For example, a child who pushes books on the floor out of escalating anger could give up his/her computer time to clean and straighten the entire book center if the teacher indicates this could be helpful. Another child who hits at recess, may need a smaller recess with closer adult proximity to practice keeping hands and feet to self before he/she is ready for the more unstructured, larger recess setting. Meanwhile, the student may draw a picture for the hurt student to help make up for his/her unsafe actions.

Even when traumatized students present with what may be big, threatening behaviors, it helps to remember that underneath, they are experiencing overwhelming, difficult emotions. They likely feel out of control and need our help to calm their bodies so the upstairs brain can come back online. The key lies not in a behavior modification plan, but in how we help each student regulate and then, move forward in his/her relationships with class-mates and adults. That is what being trauma-sensitive is all about.



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