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Practical Strategies and Tools for the Trauma Informed Classroom

Flashlight Dance

Many children with a history of trauma live life loud, fast and intense. It is difficult for them to slow down and calm themselves. For some, a state of quiet and calm evokes vulnerability and they immediately resume their more hyper-aroused state. It is, therefore, important to help them learn to tolerate a sense of calm. Here is an idea:

Have the children lay down on a beach towel and give each one a flashlight. Warn them that you are going to dim the lights. It is important that you know your children's history and are aware of children that might be afraid. Explain what is going to happen and ask if anyone needs a grown up to sit with them. If you have a child that you know will be triggered by this activity give them the option of doing something different.

After you dim the lights talk to the children about making their body feel like it has no bones. Show them the "floppy body" of a rag doll or stuffed animal. Turn on some soft, soothing music and tell them to make their flashlight dance on the ceiling as the music makes them feel. As they move their flashlights, ask them to pay attention to where they feel the calm in their body. It will take several experiences before children will begin to recognize the "calm" in their body.

After we did this activity several times in our preschool a three-year old suddenly sat up and exclaimed, "I feel my heart!" The wonder on his face was one of those moments that we teachers live for! All the children sat up and felt their heart beat. Then we stood up and put on some music that was loud and fast. After a few moments we paused and felt our hearts beating faster. Of course not all of the children grasped what was happening but it is through repeated experiences such as this that children become aware of internal sensations and begin to tolerate new ones.

Suggestions for music:

Hap Palmer's album *Movin'* has a variety of rhythms

Lullaby Renditions: Baby Beatles Songs

Playful Touch

For some children with a history of trauma, touch is associated with harm. They will resist any form of intentional touch. It is important to respect children's wishes and never force them to accept affectionate touch. In these cases, providing lots of opportunities for playful touch is a way that we can gradually help children learn to feel safe with human contact. This is a rhyme that many of our children enjoy:

Have a child sit with their back to you. Use your finger as a "marker" and chant the following while "writing" on their back.

Around the world in eighty days (make a circle)

X marks the spot (make an X)

Comma, comma, comma, question mark (Make three commas and a question mark)

Spiders crawling up your back (move your fingers up their back)

Bite, bite, bite (playfully squeeze their shoulders)

Tight squeeze (playfully squeeze their rib cage or upper arms)

Cool breeze (blow on their neck)

Now you've got the shivereeze (rake your fingers up their spine)

A couple of our parents have reported that their children love doing this at home and they have been able to use this in those tense moments when a child becomes dysregulated.

Behavioral Rehearsal

It is not uncommon for children with a history of trauma to suddenly bolt from the classroom and attempt to run. We had a four-year old “runner” in our preschool this past year. After his first escape from the classroom I put a large stop sign on the door leading to the hallway. The next morning I showed him the sign and he immediately recognized that it said, “Stop.” I explained to him that it was my job to keep him safe and when he ran out of the classroom and down the hall I could not do my job.

Then I explained to him that whenever he went through the door, he had to have a grown up with him. If he went through the door without a grown up he had to be my buddy for the rest of the day and hold my hand. He of course agreed and said he understood.

Each morning after that, one of our staff did a “behavioral rehearsal” with him. Upon his arrival, he was taken to the door and asked these questions:

- What does this sign say?
- Why is it important for you to “stick together” and stay in the room?
- If you go through the door, what do you need to have with you? (a grown up)
- What will happen if you go through the door without a grown up? (be your buddy for the rest of the day)

For several days he did well but then the inevitable happened. He bolted out of the classroom. In a voice that was commanding but not scary, I ordered him to stop. He complied. I took him by the hand and led him back to the stop sign. We went through our routine of questions once again. I asked him what was going to happen now and he said, “I have to be your buddy for the rest of the day.”

This is indeed what happened. For the rest of the day he held my hand and had to go everywhere I went. When it came time to play outside he asked if he could play on the equipment and I told him it was going to be really hard for the two of us to hold hands and go down the slide, climb on the bars etc etc. The two of us took a walk while the rest of the children played. It actually turned out to be one of those amazing moments of connection. This little guy did not resist at all. We talked about his foster family and the things he loved to do. We walked to a nearby park and watched the ducks in the pond and I pointed out that the baby ducks listened and obeyed their mama. If they didn’t follow her and stick together they were likely to get lost or harmed.

This was the one and only time he ran again. Each morning, day after day, we did our little routine. Because we share space, our sign disappeared along the way but by then he clearly knew the routine.

Months later he was having a bad morning and I could see the wheels turning. He was thinking about running and pressed his shoulder against the door to leave. I simply said, “Think about your choice.” At that moment someone walked in carrying a bag of potting soil for one of our activities. I seized this fortunate moment and told him Ms. Jones needed some muscle to help her carry the bag. He was ready to help and this “heavy work” activity got him back on track.

Behavioral rehearsals are an important tool in helping children learn and practice desired behaviors. It is important to do this at a time when the child is calm and not in a state of dysregulation.

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