

POLICY BRIEF

June 5th, 2020



SCHOLARS
STRATEGY NETWORK

TREPeducator.org/covid-19-ed-conference

Reframing Behavior Problems as an Unmet Need

by Morgan Derby, The Trauma Informed Teacher

What will the beginning of the 2020-21 school year look like? With the COVID-19 pandemic ongoing, there is so much uncertainty relating to education, and no one can claim to have every answer.

Although returning to school is likely to restore some sense of safety and structure for students, the problems they experienced during their time at home will not go away when students return to traditional classrooms. Many children may have experienced stress, fear, loss, and trauma during their time away from school. Such trauma can impact the brain, causing children to think and behave differently.¹ Often, but not always, their behavior can appear to be willful, acting-out behavior.² However, as we return to school it is important that we consider it highly likely that those behaviors are the result of trauma from or exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.³

Schools Lack Capacity to Meet Growing Mental Health Needs of School-aged Children

Reframing Behavior

In a traditional classroom setting, teachers and administrators use discipline strategies such as sticker charts, color-coded behavior models, detentions, or the removal of privileges to try to modify behavior. However, these strategies are not consistently successful and can further exacerbate feelings of trauma and stress in students who have experienced trauma.⁴ Students may start to internalize a message that they are inherently bad which can be quite damaging in the long run.

Evidence-Based Guidance for How Schools Can Respond to A National Mental Health Crisis in the Wake of COVID-19

By recognizing and reacting to students' behaviors through a trauma-informed lens, educators can create a paradigm shift within their classroom culture that can eliminate the need for most, if not all, traditional punitive discipline. Behavior problems (outside the context of developmentally appropriate behaviors or behaviors related to a disability) are an indicator of an unmet need, revealing that something in a child's world is not as it should be. The goal is to meet the need driving the negative behavior and thereby eliminate the reason for the behavior and the behavior itself.

How to Identify and Meet the Unmet Needs of Students

Develop strong relationships with students. Strong, healthy, positive teacher-student relationships are the foundation of a trauma-informed classroom. When teachers get to know their students well and simultaneously let students get to know them, they are able to understand their students on a deeper level.⁵ A healthy, positive teacher-student relationship builds trust which encourages connection and responsiveness, thus serving as a foundation for understanding and modifying behavior.

Identify patterns of behavior. Predictable behavior can be prevented using tools, such as a functional behavior assessment (FBA), a team meeting, or other identification and tracking methods. Identifying the problem behavior and its patterns can yield significant information about the need driving the behavior. Noise, changes in routine, stress, transitions, hunger/thirst, changes in temperature, peer conflict, or feeling threatened are all potential situations (among many, many more) that could trigger concerning behaviors.⁶

Look at the product of the behavior. Consider what the child seeks to gain or anticipates as the result of the behavior. The negative behavior, although not desirable, is helping to provide the child with something that they need. If a child regularly hits a peer, do they know they will get sent home from school early each time or they will get to spend one-on-one time with a favorite staff member? What are the child's emotions before and after the behavior? Exploring the answers to those questions can help to better identify why a child is behaving in an inappropriate way. Many children will have endured horrible events during their time spent away from school that may be disclosed, but some may not, and especially in those cases a child's behavior can indicate trauma to a discerning adult.

Meet the need. When a student is using their behavior to ask for feelings of safety, acceptance, connection etc., identify strategies to allow the need to be met within the school day. If a child is using their behavior to ask for attention rather than immediately responding with negative

Evidence-Based Guidance for How Schools Can Respond to A National Mental Health Crisis in the Wake of COVID-19

attention, the adult needs to give the student positive attention and affirmation as often as possible. By meeting the need of the child, the need driving the negative behavior as well as the behavior itself will be eliminated. It is not always a simple task, but utilizing trauma-informed corrective strategies can often eliminate the need for traditional, punitive forms of discipline.

Shifting the Mindset

Reframing behavior through the lens of trauma does not necessarily require special tools or curriculums, but it does require a mindset shift. When students return to classes in a physical school building, teachers and administrators will need to shift their thinking on student behavior to reflect the trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic. It will be a natural reaction to want to spend extra time trying to catch up on any gaps in academics due to the pandemic, but spending more time developing strong, health teacher-student relationships will likely reveal larger gains in academics, social-emotional skills, and positive behavior in the long run. Students who have experienced trauma crave a positive, fulfilling connection with a healthy adult. Feeding that connection with copious positive interaction will likely help students fill an emotional need left by the trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic, while also creating a positive classroom environment that optimizes learning.

Morgan Derby is a high school special education teacher and the creator of the blog, *The Trauma Informed Teacher*.

¹ Forbes, H. (2012). *Help for Billy*. Beyond Consequences Institute, LLC.; Perry, B., & Szalavitz, M. (2006). *The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog*. Basic Books.

² Miller, C. (n.d.) How trauma affects kids in school. *Child Mind Institute*. <https://childmind.org/article/how-trauma-affects-kids-school/>

³ NYU Langone Health. (2020). *Trauma in children during the covid-19 pandemic*. News Hub. <https://nyulangone.org/news/trauma-children-during-covid-19-pandemic>; Perry, B., & Szalavitz, M. (2006).

⁴ Sporleder, J., & Forbes, H. (2016). *The trauma-informed School: A step-by-step implementation guide for administrators and school personnel*. Beyond Consequences Institute, LLC.; Forbes, H. (2012).

⁵ Souers, K. & Hall, P. (2016). *Fostering resilient learners: Strategies for creating a trauma-sensitive classroom*. (pp. 111) Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

⁶ Purvis, K. B., Cross, D. R., & Sunshine, W. L. (2007). *The Connected Child*. McGraw Hill.