

Voices of Experience

Passing teaching wisdom from experienced teachers to new teachers is a cherished part of teacher professional learning. In this essay to young teachers – really to all of us – experienced elementary teacher Georgia Davies shares her experiences teaching children who have experienced trauma. We trust her insights can help all teachers create more hospitable classrooms so that all children may flourish.

Trauma-sensitive Classrooms

By Georgia Davies

Georgia Davies is a Grade 2 teacher at Abbott school in Edmonton, Alberta. She specializes in trauma-sensitive teaching practices and shares classroom strategies with co-workers and people across the district in Edmonton Public Schools. Georgia is currently a graduate student at the University of Alberta, working towards her master's in Elementary Education.

Every day in classrooms across North America, children come to school from homes where they are neglected, abused, or may suffer violence. Emotionally in turmoil, anxious, frightened or angry, they are not ready to learn when they walk through the school door. A typical scenario:

Jay walks in late to class again. He is cold. His brown socks are ripped up to his ankles. He has his boots in his hand and I am taken aback when I realize he is holding rain boots. It is -35C today. Jay just walked to school in rain boots with torn socks. I ask him if his feet are cold, and immediately look up his mother's phone number. Not to my surprise, her number is not in use. I am not able to contact her.

I ask Jay to hang up his things. He does as he is asked, and hangs up his old worn-out cheetah print coat. Yes, it is a girl's coat, but it is all he has. He then hangs up his black and green backpack. It is worn out with a few holes and one broken zipper. Inside are the following:

- his agenda*
- old newsletters*
- granola bar wrappers*
- a very old note from me*
- pencils*
- a few books*

His agenda is used every day to remind him what he needs to do each night. Jay is responsible and does not forget his agenda. His agenda is never signed and notes to his parents are not read. Old newsletters are left in the front pocket. He has granola bar wrappers, pencils, and some books that were given to him from the school, as he expresses that he is often hungry and does not own any pencils or books at home.

Jay's story is similar to those of perhaps millions of children in North America. These children cannot function well unless their school's teachers and staff are attuned to the conditions they live in and the emotional states they bring to school. We call schools that are sensitive to these matters "trauma-sensitive." Work in a trauma-sensitive school is intense, because a significant majority of children live with violence, neglect, and abuse. How does a teacher even begin to create a classroom environment that allows traumatized children to focus, thrive, and succeed in the classroom? In this essay, I hope to share a number of ideas

that have worked successfully in my classroom and school.

Five strategies that work well include: (1) building strong relationships; (2) understanding children with trauma; (3) creating a structured, calming learning environment; (4) teaching through differentiation; and, (5) engaging children in daily lessons. Each strategy focuses on helping children who have experienced trauma in their home and can be used by any classroom teacher to help improve the community, relationships, and behaviors of children who have experienced trauma. They are also good strategies for “regular” kids.

1. Building Strong Relationships

The teacher’s relationships with children and parents, as well as children’s relationships with each other, are key to optimum classroom success. Creating strong bonds where children feel safe and can have trusting relationships helps build a classroom where traumatized children can learn and grow. Getting to know each child, listening to them, and allowing them to have a voice in the classroom are all crucial to success.

It is important to understand that parents of at-risk children often shy away from being involved or even appearing at school, which is sometimes due to intimidation or fear of teacher confrontation. Either way, it is up to the teacher to welcome parents without approaching them in negative ways. Teachers must try to make school a safe and caring place for both children and their parents. Simple things like making phone calls home to give parents good news about their children can help form positive relationships.

2. Understanding children with trauma

Traumatized children come to school without basic tools to self-regulate

their feelings, get along with others, follow rules, and respect and listen to adults. They often experience strong power struggles where they fight to keep any sense of autonomy. In addition to these deep-rooted feelings, many children arrive hungry, angry, unfocused, and out of control. The result is that teachers must understand that, before positive learning can happen, they have to help children become ready to learn.

Obviously, creating a hospitable environment for learning works best when the whole school staff collaborates and coordinates efforts. For example, a school can put together a snack program to feed the children in the morning when they arrive. Some traumatized children might not have even eaten since lunch at school the day before. Obviously, hungry children find learning secondary to their irritating, gnawing stomachs. Allowing for a period of calmness where children eat a snack together while perhaps watching a tumble book (online story book) or something educational helps alleviate some of the most pressing issues.

Second, teachers can progress to a “feelings check.” A feelings check helps measure how children are feeling when they get to school. Feelings checks can be instituted school-wide as a way to help identify children who need help becoming emotionally regulated so they can learn. One by one, children will explain how they are feeling. If a child expresses anger, sadness, or fear, a teacher should ask that child to express one way she could be happy. Such expressions help children self-regulate, because their negative feelings can be replaced with positive ones.

Once a feelings check is completed, teachers will be more aware which children might need extra assistance, emotional help, or attention during the day.

Teachers should share that information so that playground and lunch supervisors can reinforce the strategy. Such a process can help prevent outbreaks from occurring. By understanding the children's emotional states and needs, teachers will know when to back off and let a child cool down.

Cooling down can take as long as 30 minutes if a traumatized child has been emotionally triggered. Cooling down requires a safe classroom space in which to calm body and mind. Teachers should take care to explain to children that this space is not a "timeout" place, but rather a safe place for when they feel emotionally upset or frustrated.

Over time, teachers can learn what triggers certain children's emotions and what helps them become regulated again. The best way to learn children's emotional needs is gentle directness – simply ask children what they need. They will most often come up with a better strategy than even the most sensitive teacher can devise. Understanding what we as teachers can do to help traumatized children is a first step to success in the trauma-sensitive classroom. Children will, in most cases, have the answers. The teacher must simply listen.

In my experience, children are brilliant at finding solutions and, when teachers adopt children's ideas, children will be strengthened, relationships between children and teachers will grow, and children become calm. Establishing calm and trusting relationships is absolutely essential in creating environments where traumatized children can become productive children.

Traumatized children are sensitive to any signs of danger. Therefore, it is important that teachers remain calm in frustrating situations – and, in my experience, situations can become frustrating for everyone involved. Resisting

anger is a key. Good teaching calls for calmly expressing exactly how, where, and why the frustration has emerged. Naming frustrations helps children understand that they are not in danger and that sometimes frustration is natural – but avoidable. Calmly discussing frustrations also helps children learn to better deal with their feelings. Ultimately, teachers can help reform how traumatized children perceive adults and teach children what positive, caring relationships look like between adults and children.

Teachers are never alone when engaging traumatized children. One source of help is other children. Specifically, children who grow up in stable homes, without violence, neglect, or abuse, are already equipped with tools to help treat others in accepting and loving ways. Often stable children come to school knowing the difference between right and wrong and knowing how to treat others respectfully.

Teachers should always avoid power struggles with children. Traumatized children do not always listen because teachers are adults and have authority. Sometimes, it might seem as if power – just stopping an action – is the most pragmatic way to alleviate difficulty; however, often power struggles steal the last thing many children can hold onto. A more effective solution is to allow children to retain power but to offer a choice of consequences, lessons, and projects.

3. Create a structured and calm learning environment

All teachers know the importance of creating classroom rules and routines. In a trauma-sensitive classroom, rules and routines must be intentionally consistent so that classrooms have a high level of predictability. Predictability

helps children begin to regulate their actions and thoughts throughout the day. Predictability in the classroom also creates stability and ease in the minds of children. Children like to know what the day will look like and how long certain activities will be.

Because the physical area of a classroom can help children remain calm, classrooms should be organized, clean, welcoming, and structured. Creating this environment should be a responsibility that children share. Having a designated slot each week for desk cleaning helps keep children's spaces and minds organized. The more organized children are, the less frustration and confusion they experience. Classrooms should contain tools and activities children can use to calm their bodies and brains. Puzzles, Buddha boards, coloring books, lava lamps, etch-a-sketch, and play dough are amazingly successful. Some teachers argue that access to toys will lead to children excusing themselves from classroom learning. However, as children build relationships with their teachers and learn that these are calming tools, not toys, most will understand and respect this rule.

In extreme cases, children with severe behaviors will need more than just calming tools. Here's a real-life example from my classroom:

In November of my first year of teaching, a lovely grade 3 girl named Lindsey had a stroke in my arms in the middle of class. She was bright, sensitive, and affectionate, although had difficulty expressing these positive traits. She was rushed to hospital and had emergency surgery. I visited her in the hospital and was told by the doctors that she had almost died, had to have two large tumors removed, and might never walk, talk, or think the same again.

Lindsey's mother was advised to admit her little girl into the Glenrose

Rehabilitation School for Children for one full year. However, a month later, when the school's psychologist questioned Lindsey to see where they should place her, she refused to answer any questions. Lindsey never even made it into their education program because they could not elicit enough cooperation from her. However, she made a miraculous physical recovery, and so just two months after her stroke she was put back into my classroom.

This little nine-year-old girl came back into the classroom more terrified than before. She could barely stand without shaking, a large portion of her head was shaved from the surgery, and all she wanted to do was be at my side or just run away. I ended up teaching with her in my arms off and on for about one month. Lindsey was unable to sit and do any work. She was just so afraid.

By June, Lindsey was able to sit, play, walk, talk, and think like most grade 3 children. She even wrote her Provincial Achievement Test with the help of a scribe. Lindsey still had a phobia of people being sick, but in all other areas she was acting normally. How was this even possible? What support was given to her so that she could function in a classroom again? I believe Lindsey recovered because of her incredible inner strength, coupled with my strong relationship with her. She trusted me, and I listened to what she needed from me and gave that to her.

I also used several trauma-sensitive strategies that I believe helped significantly. When I found that Lindsey was coming back to our school, I knew I had to prepare for her successful re-entry into the classroom. I could not fail, so I had to take stock of what I knew and what I could do. I knew she loved animals. She often pretended to be a cat, and was constantly drawing them.

Before her stroke, she continually asked me to get a hedgehog as a classroom pet. So, the week before her return, I bought a little albino hedgehog, a miniature tent, and a few big coloring books. I was determined to help Lindsey get her life back and learn to function in a classroom.

The hedgehog had a huge impact on her recovery. When Lindsey was not by my side, she would be coloring at her desk with the hedgehog sleeping in his little tent. The hedgehog had a profound calming effect on her. She was able to stay in her desk when the hedgehog was there. She could stay at school, participate, and learn. Between the hedgehog and I, Lindsey gradually quit being so frantic.

To my surprise, the little hog also helped many other struggling children as well. I became a firm believer in pet therapy and what animals can do to help the most severely-behaved children. As time went on, and I learned how effective the hedgehog was, I bought two frogs that swam around in a small movable tank. I mostly used them for a little boy who had severe test anxiety. He could not finish any test without crying, ripping the test, or running away. As soon as I put the frogs on his desk, his test anxiety faded away. He was able to finish tests without any outward behaviors. This therapy worked so well in the classroom that his parents ended up getting him frogs at home.

4. Differentiation

In my experience, each child presents a different challenge and teachers know that every child has different learning needs. I believe teachers must be inquisitive, listen to what children communicate (verbally or otherwise), and be

alert to the range of possible approaches that will help meet that challenge. Fair is not always equal, and in any classroom setting teachers must use their wisdom to ensure that children experience fairness. Different children will need different learning tools to achieve the same outcome. One of the best approaches for children who need different learning strategies is to simply listen and watch. A struggling child often expresses frustrations through body language. Sometimes teachers will be able to think of adaptations, but in many cases children are able to express what they need to do to achieve a certain learning goal. Simply watching and listening can be productive.

Another idea that works well is structuring a seating plan so children of different learning abilities sit beside each other. Restructuring opens opportunities for children to learn from each other and to build teamwork within the classroom. Some teachers may disagree with extrinsic rewards, but children differ. Some may need extrinsic rewards to reach a point where they can independently complete a task or achieve a behavioral goal. If so, provide these rewards but slowly decrease them until the outcome is accomplished, then celebrate with the child who no longer needs the extrinsic reward. Children usually respond well.

5. Engagement

For the most part, engaged children do not behave inappropriately. Thus, engagement is especially important in trauma-sensitive classrooms where children are prone to daily displays of negative behaviors. Student engagement is especially important in a trauma-sensitive classroom because, for many children, doing well in school and learning how to enjoy learning is poorly supported at

home. Teachers can engage children by presenting them with challenges.

Challenges force all of us to problem-solve and find different ways to achieve goals.

Children are also social and love to talk and interact with their classmates. As teachers, we should reinforce learning through collaboration. Such sharing will also help create a strong community within the classroom. Forming safe bonds with each other – both children and adults – helps us more safely express our thoughts and ourselves. When children feel safe enough in the classroom to take risks without worrying about failure, we know we have created a safe learning environment. I have learned that, when children feel safe, have opportunities to work and share together, and can draft and challenge ideas, they learn.

Not every child learns or can be assessed in the same manner. As teachers, we must work to engage children in formative assessment so both teachers and children can see growth and improvement. Engaging children in learning helps create lifelong learners where children learn how to learn. These ideas to help engage children are always important, but especially in trauma-sensitive classrooms because children need the most support and encouragement to become internally motivated to continue to learn.

What I have learned as a beginning teacher in a trauma-sensitive school

Because I began my career in a trauma-sensitive classroom, I had little choice but to do what I could both to survive and then to thrive along with my

children. The ideas outlined above are just a few of the many I've tried. My experience suggests that these ideas work to help all children succeed. Sadly, my children have shared horrible stories that no one, especially a child, deserves. I came to believe I had a responsibility to make school a special, happy, healthy, and safe learning space. Instead of seeing teaching as emotionally and physically challenging, I chose to come to work each day believing I was lucky to be a part of my children's day. I knew that, for most children, I would be the most important and positive person in each of their lives that day. To me, that is an amazing gift, from them to me – not me to them.