Safe and Sound:
Creating a net of calm connection to foster resiliency and growth in schools

Workshop Objectives:
- Learn why fear explains many problems encountered by educators, students, and teams
- Learn about the importance of connection and co-regulation in education and student development
- Identify the factors associated with environments that can reduce fear and anxiety
- Develop skills to foster environments supportive enough to foster calm connection and facilitate resiliency and growth

Understanding Common Behaviors as Fear
- Defensiveness/Reluctance to Try
- Fear of Failure/Judgment/Punishment
- Worry
- Fear of The Unknown
- Impulsivity
- Fear of Losing Out/Helplessness
- Trouble Focusing/Addiction
- Fear of The Present Moment
- Tearfulness, Aggression
- Primary Fear Response

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Identified Patient Theory

School Team Worries About What Student May Do
△
Team Acts More Fearful or Controlling Around Student
△
Student Senses Danger/Rejection
△
Challenging Emotions and Behaviors

Fear is the basis of many challenges among children on the spectrum and it also exists systemically on school teams.

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Systemic Fear

Fear Is Contagious

Calm Is Also Contagious!

When we get out of fear, the system around us can too!

Co-Regulation

Auto regulation is the ability to self-regulate independently. It is the ability to calm oneself down when agitation rises to the upper limits of tolerance and alert oneself up when lethargic or down.

Interactive (psychobiological) regulation utilizes relationships to mitigate breaches in the window of tolerance, and to stimulate or calm oneself.

From Allan Schore (Pat Ogden)

Healthy Attachment Sequence

Physical or Emotional need

Relaxation

Distress

Need is understood and met

Trust in self and others
Belief in basic safety
Self-soothing
Object constancy

The Importance of Basic Safety

When we are feeling connected and calm, we believe we are generally safe in the world.

Basic safety brings us out of survival mode and allows higher order processes to occur like the development of:

Problem solving
Perspective taking
Empathy

When experiencing anxiety, children on the spectrum can lose their sense of basic safety. This blocks non-emergent functions like learning and emotion regulation.
So How Do We Create Calm Connected Schools?

Connection and Co-Regulation Are Key

Don’t: Tell Kids (or anyone) What They Need

“You Don’t Know What I Need!”

The kids are right!

• We don’t actually know what another person needs in a given moment
• We want to empower kids to be the experts on their needs and experiences in order to foster self-advocacy
• Many students react poorly when adults aren’t being fully honest
• Telling children to change their behavior because of what they need is subtly dishonest
• Typically behavioral limits and directions are actually given because of adult needs. And that’s ok!

Find and Address Sources of Urgency
Many Problems Are Important But Not Urgent

- Time
- Embarrassment
- Disempowerment
- Wellbeing/learning of other children at school

Behavior May Shift Faster When Adults Step Out of Urgency

“Why does it feel so urgent to me that this person change their behavior right now?”
“Why is it that I think will happen or resolve if this person were to do what I wanted?”
“Can I solve my problem without this person needing to change their behavior?”

What Should Be Urgent?

Any significant impact on the ability of one or more individuals to feel comfortable and safe.

And that's it!

Benefits of Identifying and Releasing Urgency:

- Students may calm in their own time once adults relax.
- Adults who are accountable for their own sense of urgency have better luck with stressed kids.
- Once you identify the true need for behavior change you can broach it with the student in an honest and collaborative way.
Urgency-Accountable Communications:

Adult Self-Reflection

“I Need” Statements

Collaborative Problem Solving

Don’t: Minimize Triggers

Child: I can’t find my lunchbox!

Child: No I need it right now!

Child: I need my lunchbox!

Child: I need my lunchbox!!!!

Nurse: It’s ok, I’m sure it will turn up

Nurse: Well I don’t see it. Don’t worry we’ll just put your lunch in a paper bag for today

Nurse: Don’t worry, you won’t be in trouble for losing it.

Well-Meaning Minimization:

Do: Practice Radical Empathy

Radical Empathy

Adults allow themselves to fully feel a child’s distress

Adults recognize that humans are generally doing the best they can

Students don’t want to melt down at school any more than adults do at work

Adults consider what would have to happen for them to have a commensurate meltdown in a given setting

Adults accept that children’s triggers have this level of emotional intensity

The key is not to convince a student that their concern isn’t a problem or jump to offer potential fixes.

The key is to communicate genuine empathy with student distress so that they trust us to help them solve their problem.
Empathic Responding:

Student: I can’t find my lunchbox!
Nurse: Losing things is an awful situation. I’ve lost things too before and it’s the worst feeling. Would you like some help?

Student: I don’t know where it went!
Nurse: Of course, I’ll help you look for it.

Student: I had it this morning, went!
Nurse: Oh wow, have you been without it a long time?

Student: Yes and no, I’m going to starve!
Nurse: I’m sorry you are feeling that way. Remember it’s important to you.

Student: I had it this morning, went!
Nurse: I don’t know where it lunchbox!
Student: I can’t find my

Summary of Creating Calm Connection:

Find ways to stay genuinely calm
Be honest about your own agenda and needs
Allow yourself time to understand student distress before trying to fix it
Stay open to the positive in yourself, your colleagues and your students.

References


