Classroom Strategies

for Traumatized, Oppositional Students

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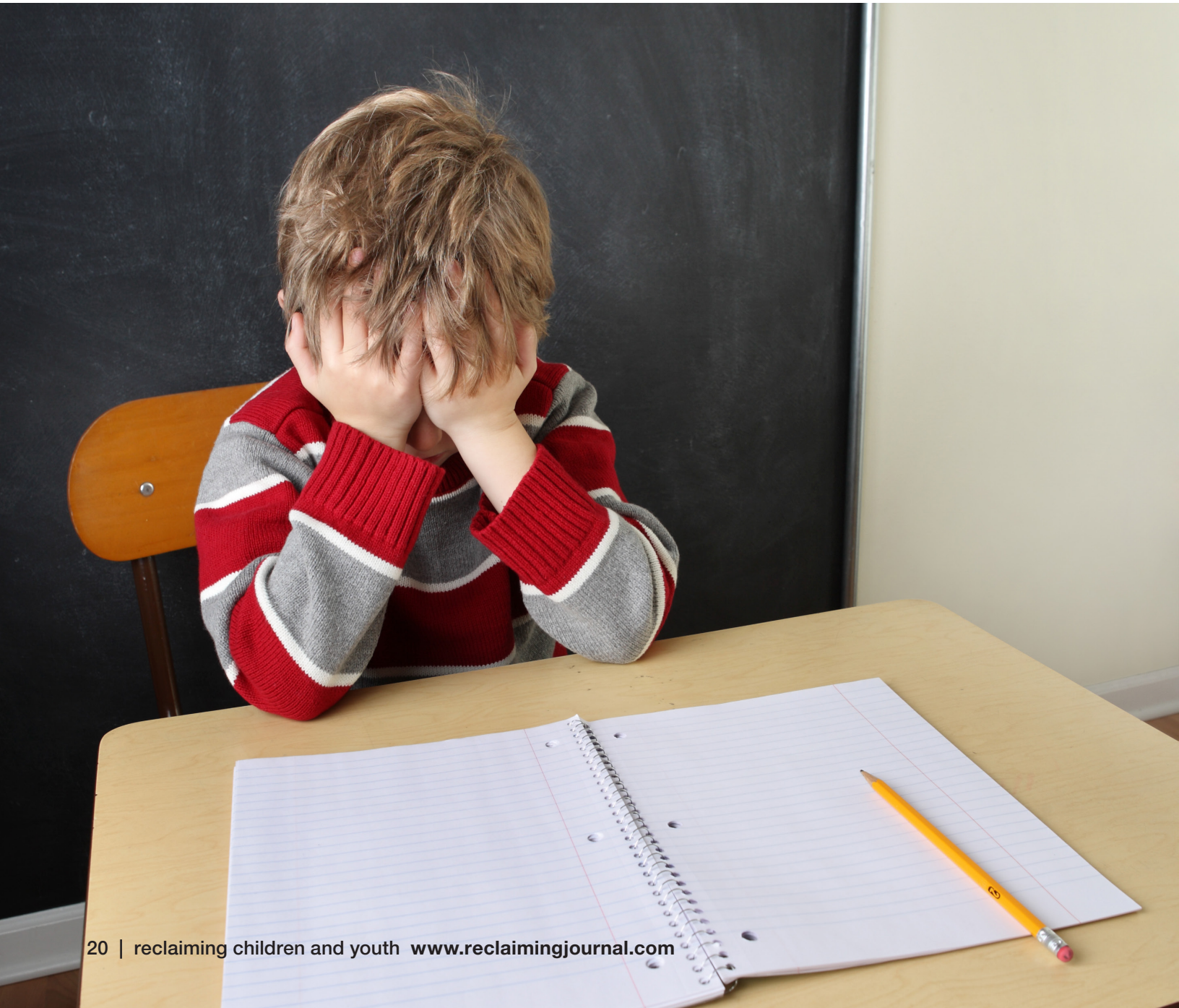
Many students presenting serious behavior problems are struggling to cope with the effects of trauma. They need to find a sense of safety and form positive relationships in order to achieve learning goals. Brain research points to practical strategies that can help these students regulate their behavior and find success in school.



Many serious mental health diagnoses of children and youth are better understood as developmental trauma (van der Kolk, 2005). We now know that a range of adverse experiences can alter brain development. These youth operate in survival mode as seen in hyper-vigilance and hyper-arousal. This is the state we might experience walking through a Halloween haunted house. We know that something scary is about to happen, but we do not know what or when. Every sound or movement grabs our attention, and we are on guard in expectation of the next fearful event.

Trauma Reactions

In the classroom, hyper-vigilance leads to attention and learning problems. Instead of focusing on the learning task, students who have experienced trauma constantly scan the environment and are easily distracted by any stimuli. Nonverbal messages generated by eye contact, voice tone, and even proximity to others can be perceived as danger. We see hyper-arousal when students act out in response to perceived threats—such as a teacher presenting an assignment students believe they cannot successfully complete.

Threat reactions arise as the amygdala sends messages of danger to the lower survival brain. This is not just physical danger, since any school experience that makes the individual feel weak, stupid, or vulnerable could spark a fight or flight reaction. Even eye contact or staring can be especially provocative. In the animal world, predators fix their eyes on prey before attack; thus, even birds watch potential predators' eyes and stop feeding or flee when the gaze fixes on them (University of Bristol, 2008). Although anyone can be uncomfortable at being watched, students in a state of hyper-arousal are much less able to control their responses. Reflex, not reason, drives action when under intense stress.

Since trauma involves an overwhelming feeling of loss of control (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006), these students seek to protect themselves by trying to maintain control. Simply being told by a teacher to sit down can call forth the need to stay in control. This is seen as students argue, partially follow instructions in their own way or time, or refuse to follow them at all. For example, when told to sit down, the child may sit down halfway or walk clear around the room before arriving at her seat.

Children who have experienced trauma are often uncomfortable in large group situations. They may refuse to join a class activity, such as carpet time or even walking in line. The student may be willing to lead the line, and therefore have a feeling of control, or he may hang far back or walk to the side. When forced to be in a large group setting, a youth may hit, push, touch, or grab others in an effort to feel some control. Teachers are often exasperated by behaviors that appear manipulative and controlling.

Neuroplasticity

While trauma impacts the brain, fortunately, the brain can rewire itself to develop new ways of coping; this is called neuroplasticity. Interventions designed to change neural pathways require adults to be patient, consistent, and very much in control of their own emotions. These young people will need to borrow an adult's calm brain in order to restore a sense of safety.

When dealing with trauma-reactive behavior, we seldom start with logical reasoning. Interventions must work from the bottom up, addressing the lower brain and progressing to strategies aimed at the higher brain. We must first *regulate* the lower brain. Then we can *relate* emotionally to the student, after which we can *reason* with him (Perry, 2010). Real changes are made when students feel safe enough to develop relationships and then process situations in the logical brain using language (Long, Wood, & Fecser, 2001).

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Life Space Crisis Intervention follows these trauma-responsive stages of learning. The first stage is to regulate the lower brain by draining off the intense emotions. Once the child is calm, we have an opportunity to build a trusting connection; then, we are able to listen and help the youngster examine a timeline of a stressful incident. Only then does the young person gain insight into the central issue. Neuronal connections are made through patterned, repeated experiences, so these steps need to be followed again and again. Often the biggest challenge is the first: managing behaviors and creating a safe learning environment.

Safety and Security in the Classroom

When children feel safe, their lower brains are better regulated, allowing them to form relationships and focus and learn. Bruce Perry points out that traumatized children need predictability, routine, a sense of control, and a stable relationship with supportive people (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006). To create a safe and secure environment, we must avoid re-traumatizing students. The common sense notion is that problem behavior requires negative consequences, but punishment-based discipline triggers flight, fight, or freeze reactions, making matters worse.

Under conditions of threat, the amygdala takes over, bypassing the frontal cortex and preventing real learning from taking place. Fortunately, there are specific steps that can be taken to foster the feeling of safety and security.

1. **Maintain a calm but confident demeanor.** Such adults provide the sense that they are in control and the classroom is a safe place. Cesar Millan (2007), a prominent canine expert, notes a parallel observation in dogs, asserting that owners need to maintain a calm assertiveness. Dogs will not follow a high strung pack leader that barks and bites; this a sign of instability and an impulsive leader cannot keep the pack safe. Nor will a dog that cowers become a leader since protection is tied to confident strength. There are parallels to leadership in the classroom. A reactive and domineering teacher will create fight, flight, freeze reactions, as seen in oppositional and defiant behaviors, shutting down, or fearful compliance. With an insecure teacher who allows the students to run the classroom, the most insecure child becomes the center of chaos. However, teachers who maintain low adrenaline levels and quiet voice tones while exuding confidence produce similar behaviors and feelings in their students.

2. **Build in structure, predictability, and routine.** Provide a daily visual schedule to which you refer to guide each transition. List exactly what the student is to complete before receiving a break or desirable activity. The schedule can prevent unnecessary manipulation and contests of wills. For example, if a student comes up with a regular excuse to visit the nurse, build nurse visits into her schedule. This provides a sense of predictability and control. Of course, it is up to the individual student whether to do the assignment or how long to take. Natural and logical consequences follow as a result of the student's choices.

3. **Give frequent but brief positive attention.** Move in, drop a thought or comment, or give some positive feedback ("You've already completed five problems!"), then walk away. Avoid hovering or lecturing. With some students, too much attention or proximity can produce a fight/flight response, whereas dropping a thought and moving on allows time to process what was said. Other children try to dominate the teacher's attention, and providing regular and predictable attention will help (e.g., the students know they will get their turn with the teacher).

4. **Break assignments into manageable segments.** Tasks should have a clear beginning and end so that the student perceives success is possible. This also allows teaching to focus on smaller units of learning so the student is not overwhelmed. Tasks that are overly difficult become discouraging, while those that are too easy are boring. The key is to find that just manageable level of difficulty.

5. **Call on students in a predictable order.** Either follow a given order or pull names from a cup. This not only provides predictability, it decreases calling out and demonstrates fairness. Many of these students believe that the reason they are not being called on is because the teacher does not like them.

6. **Monitor seating arrangements.** During large group instruction on the floor, allow this student to sit in the back, in a chair behind the group, or next to the teacher, whatever is most comfortable. Or seat the group in a circle or inverted U where they have assigned spots. Some students will often feel more comfortable in a position where they can see everyone and no one is behind them. For the same reason, seating these children on an end may be preferable to being in the middle of a table or group of desks. When walking in line, there is nothing wrong with allowing an insecure child to hold an adult's hand until he feels safe.

7. **Use strategic praise.** Rather than general, empty praise, point out specifically what the child has done or simply something noticeable about him. Students who have experienced trauma often see praise as an attempt to manipulate

and control them and quite often will do the opposite of what they just received praise for doing. "Those first three problems are right and took only two minutes!" or "I just noticed that you very politely asked Jasmine if she would hurry up at the drinking fountain. And she did!" will be more effective than "I like that you are sitting quietly doing your work." Processing an adult's observations, they can draw their own conclusions: I can do this assignment! When I'm polite, people are more cooperative.

8. **Build in frequent movement and rhythm breaks.** Movement and rhythm have been shown to regulate the lower brain, leading to better processing and therefore increased focus and learning (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006; Siegel & Bryson, 2011). Rhythm can be provided through music, dancing, swinging, drumming, poetry, or even playing catch. Children love poetry with a clear rhythm and rhyme. The calm rhythm of a teacher's voice can be regulating. Teachers have incorporated these techniques even at the middle and high school levels, for example, by tossing a ball to a student while asking a question and the student tossing it back while answering.

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9. **Provide choices whenever possible in order to allow a sense of control.** In so doing, it is important that both choices are acceptable. This gives the youth a sense of power and control and reduces motivation to exercise power in oppositional ways.

10. **Teach children about their brains.** Young people can learn to understand why they are so insecure or lose their tempers so easily. Many feel that they have two personalities: one that wants to do the right thing and another that is bad. It is comforting to know there is an explanation and, though it may be hard work, there are things that they can do to calm the lower brain. Using pictures or a hand as a model, explain the amygdala's role of responding quickly to perceived threats in order to keep us alive, but that we have the ability to use our cerebral cortex to calm the amygdala. (Daniel Siegel describes using fingers to represent the cerebral cortex, wrapped around the thumb representing the amygdala.) Bruce Perry refers to the wizard brain versus the lizard brain. The next step is to develop, model, and practice specific actions the child can take, such as creating a safety plan that will help calm the lower brain (Bloom, 1997).

Managing Oppositional Behavior

Traditional teacher responses to oppositional behavior include repeating the direction more firmly, threatening consequences, lecturing, loss of privileges, moving down on card charts, or exclusion. However, these methods seldom result in more positive behavior but often escalate the Conflict Cycle, creating the fight/flight response and reinforcing the student's belief that this is indeed a punishing and dangerous world leading to a greater need to be in control. At the first signs of opposition:

1. **Check adrenaline levels.** It is perfectly normal for our amygdala to respond to opposition as a potential threat. Being alert to reactions like blood rushing to the face or a heart rate increase, we should pause and take a deep breath or do something to calm our own brain before responding to the student. As social creatures, we feel and mirror each other's feelings. Our ability to calm ourselves can go a long way in calming a student who may feel threatened.

2. **Make a brief suggestion or drop a thought, and walk away.** Try to maintain the flow of the lesson or activity, limit words and directives, make brief eye contact, and give choices. For example, look puzzled and say, "I wonder why you'd say something like that to her," and then move on, avoiding conflict and leaving the student to reflect on the problem.

3. **Limit the use of punishment-based programming.** Students who see this as an attempt to coerce compliance become quite good at manipulating or sabotaging these systems. Punishment tends to divert their attention from their behavior to that of the punisher *(The teacher is mean and doesn't like me),* and

only strengthens their beliefs that this is a punishing world. As a matter of fact, 85 percent of escalations are a result of adults trying to implement contingency programming (Perry, 2013).

4. **Any reward program should be positive and cumulative.** Children never lose anything and eventually earn the reward. Spontaneous rewards, such as deciding on an extra recess after the group worked so hard on a test, cannot be manipulated nor does anyone lose. A lottery system where students are handed tickets for whatever behaviors or accomplishments the teacher chooses can also be effective. This quiet acknowledgement can be more rewarding than the tangible prize. Ultimately, the most powerful reward is the relationship between the adult and the student.

5. **Use only natural and logical consequences whenever possible.** Students are more likely to take responsibility for their behaviors and accept the consequences if they see that there is a natural connection between the two. The natural flow of a schedule is a good example. The student receives the break only after specific assignments are completed. Retribution, or finding a way to correct a wrong (such as doing something nice for a student whose feelings he hurt), can also be helpful.

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Teachers spend many hours a day with their students and are among the most important people in their lives. The relationships they build form the foundation for reorganizing traumatized brains and determining positive futures. In my numerous observations, I have discovered that the most effective teachers tend to:

- Maintain a calm but confident demeanor.
- Run a structured and predictable classroom following regular routines.
- Have a sense of humor.
- Actively involve the students in the lessons.
- Demonstrate empathy and understand the function of behavior.

Students, themselves, know which teachers help them feel safe, build trust, and enable them to learn. When asked about the qualities of their favorite teachers, these are frequent responses:

- I know what to expect when I walk into the classroom.
- They're patient.
- They're funny.
- They listen.

We are better able to manage behavior if we first understand the student's motivations. The ability to fathom the traumatized child's view of the world informs attempts to build a safe and predictable environment that maximizes learning.

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