# Complex Trauma in the Classroom - Considerations for building relationships with students impacted by complex trauma

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*Adapted from Presentations by the UCSF HEARTS program (Dr. Joyce Dorado) and the AuMHC HEARTS program*

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# Learning Objectives:

- Understand the impact of complex trauma on student behavior and learning in schools
- Develop skills to build safe and secure relationships with students impacted by complex trauma
- Explore strategies to support students in building resilience through relationships

# References


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# Vignette

A Story of Complex Trauma in the classroom

**What is wrong with Michael?**

**What is wrong with his teacher?**

# Shifting our Perspective:

*Intentionally Seek to Know our Students…*

Change the paradigm from one that asks,

**"What is wrong with you?"**

to one that asks,

**"What has happened to you?"**

(*from Wisconsin Dept. of Health Services www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/tic*)

**What has happened to Michael?**

**What has happened to his teacher?**

# Understanding Complex Trauma in the School Setting & Building Resilience through Relationships

- **Attachment**
  - Difficulties with peer and staff relationships
  - Difficulty enlisting advocates
- **Self-Regulation**
  - Difficulties with identifying, expressing, and modulating emotions and behaviors
- **Competency**
  - What am I good at? Mastery.
- (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, ARC Model, 2006; Zilberstein, 2014)

# Complex Trauma



Children's experiences of multiple traumatic events, often that occur within the caregiving system – the social environment that is supposed to be the source of safety and stability in a child's life

(National Child Traumatic Stress Network [NCTSN], 2003)

# Brief overview of attachment



- Close personal bond between infant and caregiver that endures across time
- Forms our foundations for relationships:  It shapes the expectations (template) of what to expect of ourselves, and how to perceive the world
- Involved in modulating the stress-response system and emotional regulatory system
- Fosters exploration and mastery, feelings of self-confidence, empathy, language development, reasoning processing, and the ability to manage and resolve conflict *(Kagan, 2005)*

# Co-Regulation









# Complex Trauma Interferes with Co-Regulation



- If child's caregiver is source of trauma or unavailable to provide co-regulation, the child's development of emotional regulation skills can be derailed: a hallmark symptom of complex trauma
- This can affect relationships into adulthood
- Relationships are also where healing takes place

# Attachment Difficulties related to Complex Trauma:

- Uncertainty about the reliability and predictability of the world
- Interpersonal difficulties
- Problems with boundaries
- Distrust and suspiciousness
- Social isolation
- Difficulty attuning to other people's emotional states
- Difficulty enlisting other people as allies (NCTSN, 2003)



# What does attachment impairment look like in schools?

- Relationships with school personnel
  - Preoccupied with safety, distrustful
  - May only feel safe when they are controlling situation
- Relationships with peers
  - Other people as sources of terror or pleasure, but rarely fellow beings with their own needs and desires
- Working with trauma can pull for intense emotions in staff:
  - Vicarious/secondary trauma

*(Cole et al., 2005)*

# Relationships are Central to Healing

When we experience compassionate and dependable relationships, we reestablish trusting connections and create opportunities for new, corrective emotional experiences.

**Every positive, attuned interaction with a trustworthy other can help to rewire the brain.**



# Healthy Relationships



- Humans are hard-wired for connection;

  It is a basic need (Harlow, 1958)

- Healthy relationships involve *attunement* and *the ability to reflect back experience*
  - Being sensitive and responsive to the feelings and needs of ourselves and of others
- Attuned relationships help us feel safe, and calm us down when stressed

# Strong Relationships: A Fundamental Cornerstone to School Success

One of the strongest predictors of academic success is the students' perception of "Does the teacher like me?"

(Pianta et al. 2008)





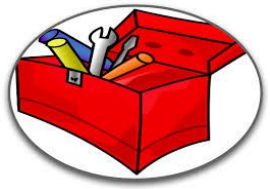
*"The most powerful protective factor in schools was the caring, supportive relationships that students had with all types of educators" –*

*(Werner & Smith, 2001)*

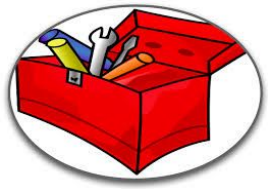
*"Every child needs one person who is crazy about them."*

- Urie Bronfenbrenner, 1977

# Relationship Building Tool:
## Attuned and Empathic Listening



- Consistent, responsive, nurturing relationships with caring adults is *key*
- How to be consistent, responsive, nurturing:
  - Reframe the meaning of the behavior
  - **Mirror, Validate, Empathize**



# Mirroring

**"Let me see if I've got that."**
**"What I hear you saying is…"**
**"Did I get that right?"**
**"Is there more about that?"**

- Mirror back without interpretation or analysis
- Mirroring  models good listening skills
- Mirroring slows down and averts potential crisis
- Mirroring helps focus productive communication



## Validate

**"That makes sense from your point of view."**
**"What makes sense is…"**

- Validation is understanding, not necessarily agreement
- If it's not making sense to you, it just means you don't have enough information yet

## Empathize

**"I imagine this might make you feel…"**
**"Did I get that right?"**
**"Is there any other feeling?"**

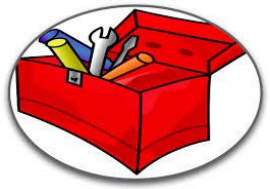
# Relationship Building Tool:

## Reframe the meaning of the behavior




- Remember the internal working model
- Don't take the child's behavior personally
- The child is expecting you to react in a certain way and will often behave in such a way as to almost guarantee whatever responses fit in with their internal working model

# Relationship Building Tool:



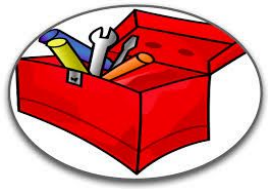
## Creating a Corrective Emotional Experience

- A new, more satisfying response to the child's typical relationship patterns

- Ask yourself, "Am I helping to create a new and reparative relationship with this child, or am I being drawn into an interaction with this child that is familiar for him/her, but problematic?

*(Hill, 2009, Teyber, 2010)*

# Relationship Building Tool:
## Deposits and Withdrawals



*5:1 Ratio of affirmations to criticism*




*"When we focus our praise on positive actions, we support a sense of competence and autonomy that helps students develop real self-esteem."* (Davis, 2007)

# Self-Care While Speaking with Traumatized Students



- Stay PRESENT in the moment (no matter how difficult!)
- Monitor and identify your emotions
- Affirmations to yourself
  - "This is not my trauma"
- Active mindfulness – be present and oriented
- Relaxation breathing
- Grounding exercise

Building **Self-Regulation** Skills with students with complex trauma

**"At the core of the traumatic stress is a breakdown in the capacity to regulate internal states."**

Van der Kolk, 2005

# Affect/Emotion Regulation: Emotional Safety

Capacity to:

- Identify emotions
- Express emotions
- Modulate emotions




(NCTSN, 2003)

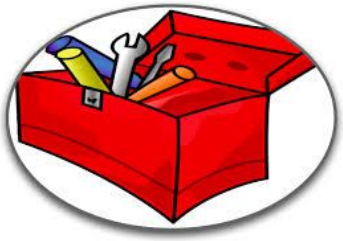
# Impairments in Affect Regulation

- Deficits in capacity to **identify** internal emotional experiences
  - trouble differentiating among states of arousal
- Difficulties with the safe **expression** of emotions
  - overly constricted or rigid
  - excessively labile and explosive
- Impaired capacity to **modulate** emotional experience
  - impaired ability to self-regulate
  - impaired ability to self-soothe



(NCTSN, 2003)

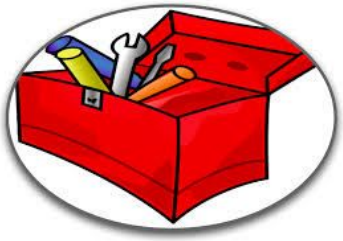
# Strategies in Affect Regulation



- "Energy" vs "Feelings"
- At what energy level is the child most comfortable?
  - Children need time during day to be at their comfortable energy level
- What energy level is most effective given specific situations (e.g., in the classroom doing deskwork)?
  - Children need tools/strategies to get their energy level to the optimum one for school activities
- Can talk with kids about how they feel in their body (beginning of affect identification):
  - It looks like your body is getting out of control

(ARC, from consultation with Margaret Blaustein, 2009)

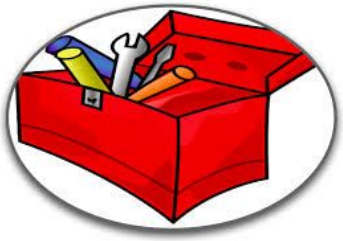
# Strategies in Affect Regulation



- Notice when your student looks anxious
  - Increase or change in behavior
- Draw on your relationship with student
  - Provide co-regulation
- Empathic, non-judgmental approach
- Calm voice and body
- "Are you ok?
- "What can I do to help you?"
- "Do you understand what you should be doing right now?"
  - If student asks question, assume they don't know and provide calm, clear response
- Offer a brain break or Peace Corner

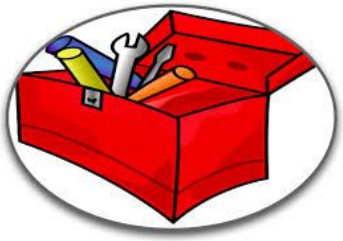
CPI Crisis Development Model (2005)

# Strategies for behavioral control:



- Consider modifications to classroom behavior support plan that allow student to do what they need to self-regulate
  - Within well-defined boundaries and practiced procedures
    - i.e. take a break, move to different part of room
- Children and youth exposed to complex trauma need **empathy and structure** to function well and to heal from trauma

# Caveats to consequences :



- Consequences are useful when:
  - They teach basic lessons about right and wrong
  - They give students the incentive to do well
- Kids with challenging behavior usually know what they've done is "wrong."
- "Won't do" kids vs. "Can't do" kids
- ***"Kids do well if they can"*** *(Greene, 1998, 2008)*
- Sometimes consequences that are experienced as punitive can actually escalate a child into even more challenging or dangerous behavior

# Building Competencies: Transforming Adversity into Resilience

- Sense of competency is severely impacted by trauma. Believing in your abilities to do well is one of the foundational blocks of building resiliency. It builds a sense of hope and a belief in a future.
- Finding a sense of mastery or competency in something







# Resilience





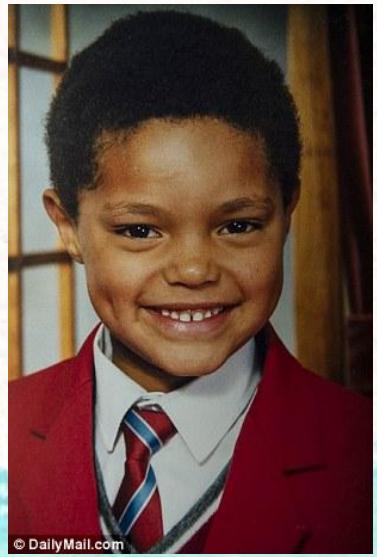












# Resources

**UCSF Healthy Environments and Response to Trauma in Schools (HEARTS)**
**hearts.ucsf.edu**

**National Child Traumatic Stress Network**:
www.nctsn.org

**Helping Traumatized Children Learn:**
traumasensitiveschools.org

**ACES Too High:**
acestoohigh.com

**Mindful Schools:**
www.mindfulschools.org

# Questions?

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