

KID CONNECTS MONTHLY NEWSLETTER: Traumatic Stress and Trust-Based Relational Intervention (TBRI)

What is Traumatic Stress?



A traumatic event is a “frightening, dangerous, or violent event that poses a threat to a child’s life or bodily integrity.”¹ For a child, witnessing a loved one’s safety being threatened is also traumatic because a child’s sense of safety is dependent on the health and wellbeing on his/her caregiver. Different from a trauma event, trauma stress is when a child is exposed to multiple traumatic events. For children exposed to traumatic stress, their development and brain architecture are alter impacting how they learn, grow and form relationships.

When a person is exposed to a traumatic event, his/her body is flooded with hormones that enable him/her to enter a fight, flight or freeze response. In the face of danger, this stress response is very adaptable and necessary. For a child that experience traumatic stress, his/her stress response does not cease. Research has shown that the prolonged activation of the stress response systems impacts brain development. Two key areas that are impacted are the amygdala and the prefrontal cortex.

The amygdala is the “watch dog of the brain.” It jobs is to alter us to danger and initiate the stress response system to enter flight, fight or freeze response.² Children that have experience traumatic stress have a larger amygdala meaning the stress response systems has been reinforced and strengthened causing the child to be hypervigilant and more prone to entering the fight, flight or freeze response.³ Children that have experience traumatic stress will often perceive subtle cues in his/her environment as threatening. For example, a child that experience abuse may be trigger into a fight, flight or freeze reaction in response to a tone of voice or loud voices in the classroom.

Research also has shown that children exposed to traumatic stress have a smaller prefrontal cortex.⁴ The prefrontal cortex helps use organize, plan, manage intense emotions and problem solve. If a child is in a state of fight, flight or freeze, he/she will have limited access to the prefrontal cortex and over time the child may develop deficits in his/her ability to learn, organize, plan, manage intense emotions and problem solve.

What is Trust Based Relational Intervention?

Trust Based Relational Intervention or TBRI[®] “is an attachment-based, trauma-informed intervention that is designed to meet the complex needs of vulnerable children who have experienced trauma”⁵. TBRI focuses on three main principles, Empowering, Connecting, and Correcting to address physical needs, attachment needs, and to create safety by

¹ The National Child Traumatic Stress Network. “About Child Trauma.” <https://www.nctsn.org/what-is-child-trauma/about-child-trauma>

² Tina Payne Bryson. 2012. *The Whole-Brain Child*. New York, NY: Random House.

³ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. “Excessive Stress Disrupts The Architecture of the Developing Brain.: Working Paper 3.” https://46y5eh11fhgw3ve3ytpwxt9r-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2005/05/Stress_Disrupts_Architecture_Developing_Brain-1.pdf

⁴ National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. “Excessive Stress Disrupts The Architecture of the Developing Brain.: Working Paper 3.” https://46y5eh11fhgw3ve3ytpwxt9r-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2005/05/Stress_Disrupts_Architecture_Developing_Brain-1.pdf

⁵ Karen Purvis Institute of Child Development. 2021. Retrieved from: <https://child.tcu.edu/about-us/tbri/#sthash.AWNSPBTA.dpbs>

disarming fear in children. “While the intervention is based on years of attachment, sensory processing, and neuroscience research, the heartbeat of TBRI® is connection⁶”.

The first TBRI principle we will discuss is **Empowerment**. We will look at this idea through the lens of empowering our students by meeting their physical needs. To conceptualize this, it is easy to think about an infant and how all their needs are met by external regulation. Adults are solely responsible for the survival of infants; when they are hungry adults feed, when they cold, adults warm. As children grow into toddlers and preschoolers, we work to co-regulate alongside them. Children begin to learn to identify their needs and ask for assistance in meeting them. For example, if they identify they are hungry, we will offer them a snack.



Next comes **self-regulation**. Adults are still in charge and ultimately responsible for meeting children’s needs, however children are gaining the skills necessary to identify and meet their own needs during elementary and middle school ages.

Impact of Trauma

When thinking about how trauma plays a role in classroom behaviors, it helpful to think about **being safe** versus **feeling safe**. As caregivers, we might believe that all children feel safe in our care because we create an atmosphere that is physically safe. On the other hand, a child who has experienced trauma might be physically safe in the room AND might not *feel safe* at the same time. Felt safety is created by routines, predictability, rituals, and transitions.⁷ Some children who have experienced trauma may exhibit sensory seeking or sensory defensive behaviors when seeking felt safety. Sensory seeking behaviors might look like frequent squirming or fidgeting, spinning, jumping, swinging, preferring loud environments, preferring to be wrapped tightly or wanting bear hugs. Sensory defensive behaviors might look like aversion to loud noises or bright lights, not wanting to get hands or body dirty, refusal to eat certain foods or refusal to wear certain clothes⁸. It is important as caregivers that we become aware of sensory needs in the classroom because children who do not have these needs met are not able to focus on anything else. For children who have experienced trauma, not having their sensory needs met could equate to not feeling safe. This could then send them into a fight, flight, or freeze response, which looks like aggressive behaviors (hitting, kicking, biting, etc), running away, or whining and clinging.

Strategies in Creating Felt Safety

How we respond matters! Before we respond to a challenging or sensory behavior from a child who has experienced trauma, it is important to shift our perspective from what is wrong with this child, to what *happened to this child*? We should ask ourselves if we are responding in a way that is 1) helping the child regulate 2) creating connection and 3) disarming fear. This can look like: getting down on the child’s level, making eye contact, a gentle touch, validating feelings, and empathizing with the feeling. Remember to chase the *WHY* behind the behavior to help children feel seen, heard, and validated. An IDEAL response is on that is: Immediate, Direct, Efficient, Action based, Leveled/aimed at the behavior to create felt safety⁹.

Transitions whether big or small can be a trigger for children who have experienced trauma. Using tools like visual schedules, verbal warnings, and light dimming can help with predictability in transitions. **Physiological strategies** that help with felt safety include hydration, physical activity, sensory diet, healthy touch, and blood sugar regulation.¹⁰ In the classroom this can look like frequent water and snack breaks (every two hours for food), physical activity every 1-2 hours with outside time, or indoor games like duck, duck, goose, ring around the rosy, or yoga moves.

⁶ Karen Purvis Institute of Child Development. 2021. Retrieved from: <https://child.tcu.edu/about-us/tbri/#sthash.AWNSPBTA.dpbs>

⁷ Purvis, Karyn. (2019). Institute of Child Development. TBRI and Trauma Informed Classrooms PDF.

⁸ Purvis, Karyn. (2019). Institute of Child Development. TBRI and Trauma Informed Classrooms PDF.

⁹ Purvis, Karyn. (2019). Institute of Child Development. TBRI and Trauma Informed Classrooms PDF.

¹⁰ Purvis, Karyn. (2019). Institute of Child Development. TBRI and Trauma Informed Classrooms PDF.

Connection: Creating Relationships that Matter

Connection is the second principle from Trust-Based Relational Intervention. **Why connect before correct?** Connecting with a child before correcting or redirecting them is allowing for them to regulate, have their emotions named/validated before they are ready to hear what their options are. Children need to feel seen and heard before being redirected. This teaches them important skills such as naming their emotions, asking for help, problem solving and learning how to cope with their emotions in healthy ways. Children need adult guidance to learn these skills and practice them. The Connecting Principles from TBRI: Mindfulness, Engagement, and Nurture groups outline strategies for adults to increase their connection and build stronger relationships with the children they care for.



Connecting Principles: Meeting Attachment Needs¹¹

1. **Mindfulness:** Bringing one's complete attention to the present moment.

Increase your Self-Awareness and Practice Mindfulness by:

- Identifying your personal triggers: identify the thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors you bring to the relationships. What causes you to “flip your lid?”
- Practicing regulating yourself during times of stress (ex. Deep breathing)
- Staying calm and emotionally present during a child's distress allows you to: think flexibly, creatively solve problems, model compassion and calmness, co-regulate with child

Attunement to the child: What is the need beneath the child's behavior? How can you meet the need?

2. **Engagement:** Nurture healthy connections and facilitate secure attachments. Adults can further engage with children through:

Healthy touch: communicates physical warmth/safety

- Hand on shoulder/back
- High fives
- Fist bumps

Eye Contact: Changes our brain chemistry.

- “I love seeing your eyes!”
- “Are those eyes green?”

Voice Quality: How we convey tone, volume and cadence can make all the difference in how a child receives a message.

- For a child who is in distress you want your tone to be soft, low volume, and slower cadence.

Behavior Matching:

- Sitting the same way as a child
- Choosing the same color toy/sticker as a child

Playful Interaction: Can help disarm fear.

- Playing games
- Not being afraid to be silly

¹¹ Purvis, Karyn. (2019). Institute of Child Development. TBRI and Trauma Informed Classrooms PDF.

- Using imaginative play

3. **Nurture Groups** promote the skills needed to create meaningful relationships. Nurture groups focus on teaching life skills such as ***giving and seeking nurturing care, self-autonomy and negotiating their needs.***

Rules of Nurture Groups: Establishing group guidelines is how children learn the expectations of the group and ensure respect of one another.

- Stick together
- No Hurts
- Have Fun

Structure of a nurture group can vary depending on the age but here are some ideas:

Check In: review rules and meaning, ask a question of the group (surface level questions then deeper questions), can use an item such as a “magic feather” (or other object) for each person to hold as a symbol of their turn to speak. Children can pass or say “no thank you” if they don’t want to share.

Band-Aids: Giving and receiving band-aids for inside or outside hurts. This is practice of giving and seeking nurturing care as well as asking permission and respecting boundaries.

How is your engine running?



Activity:

- Engine check visual
- Calming technique such as deep breathing, pressure points, chair sit-ups/pull-ups, weighted items, fidgets
- Core activity to teach life skill/life value

Closing: Celebrate group with hand hugs, high fives, or round of applause

Correcting & Honoring the Relationship

The final principle in TBRI is Correct. TBRI uses the word correcting with the intention of refocusing the child on having and making a positive choice. “Two important principles in the correcting component are proactive and responsive behavioral strategies.”¹² Value Life Terms is a proactive list designed to set the stage for positive engagement in a classroom. Behavior scripts support efforts to positively change behavior while honoring the relationship with the child:

Life Value Terms¹³

Accept No
 Our Actions Have Consequences
 Use Your Words
 Focus and Complete Your Task
 With Permission and Supervision
 Gentle and Kind/Listen and Mind
 Make Wise Decisions
 No Hurts/Show Respect

Behavior Scripts¹⁴

Re-dos. Give the child the experience of doing task the “right way” to create positive memory.
Choices. Children need to learn about making good choices that give 2 positive options.
Compromise. Make a compromise that works for both parties

¹² TBCH, “What is TBRI? | Part 4: The Correcting Principles,” *Texas Baptist Children’s Home*, Children at Heart Ministries, Inc., July 26, 2017, www.tbch.org.

¹³ Purvis, Karyn. (2019). Institute of Child Development. TBRI and Trauma Informed Classrooms PDF.

¹⁴ Purvis, Karyn. (2019). Institute of Child Development. TBRI and Trauma Informed Classrooms PDF.

The list below is 3 TBRI goals for “Correcting” in the moment of high emotion or need¹⁵.

- **Connection:** the teacher and/or parent stays in connection with the child.
- **Content:** children and parents experience feeling content, not discouraged or shamed.
- **Change:** offer positive choices, create an opportunity for behavior change to occur. And feel successful!

As we are correcting with the intention of creating positive options, consider how to set up the situation for success. “Keep in mind developmental age of child. Set the bar for success and connection. Raise expectations slowly”¹⁶.

Also, consider creating a calming engagement plan for children that need a sense of felt safety. Work with children to answer the following question: “What 3 things do you need [to calm down] when you feel _____?”¹⁷

Last month, Kid Connects sent out a newsletter focused on how our perceptions can shape our responses to children. TBRI reiterates the importance of this lens with this question:

“Do you see a child’s behavior as willful disobedience or survival behavior?”¹⁸

When we see willful Disobedience, we can create a power struggle:

Adult Request → Child increases resistance → Oppositional behavior → Social (classroom) problems

Adult Response → Enforces or states more rules → **Increase Frustration** → **Cycle Continues**¹⁹.

When we see child’s behavior as survival behavior, we can empower, connect, and correct:

Adult Request → Awareness of child’s “felt safety” → Recognize fears of child → Use words → Give voice to create compassionate understanding → **Reduced Frustration**²⁰.

Reflection Questions

As teachers and care providers, we know self-reflection is an important practice. Consider these questions:

- Am I regulated? What strategies do I have for self-regulation? “Is my response helping regulation?”²¹
- Can I see the survival behavior? How can I focus on “disarming fear?”²²
- What can I do to empower, connect, and then redirect? How can I stay present and “create connection?”²³



As Karen Purvis, creator of TBRI reminds us, “Play disarms fear! Have fun with kids!”²⁴

¹⁵ TBCH, “What is TBRI? | Part 4: The Correcting Principles,” *Texas Baptist Children’s Home*, Children at Heart Ministries, Inc., July 26, 2017, www.tbch.org.

¹⁶ Purvis, Karyn. (2019). Institute of Child Development. TBRI and Trauma Informed Classrooms PDF.

¹⁷ Purvis, Karyn. (2019). Institute of Child Development. TBRI and Trauma Informed Classrooms PDF.

¹⁸ Purvis, Karyn. (2019). Institute of Child Development. TBRI and Trauma Informed Classrooms PDF.

¹⁹ Purvis, Karyn. (2019). Institute of Child Development. TBRI and Trauma Informed Classrooms PDF.

²⁰ Purvis, Karyn. (2019). Institute of Child Development. TBRI and Trauma Informed Classrooms PDF.

²¹ Purvis, Karyn. (2019). Institute of Child Development. TBRI and Trauma Informed Classrooms PDF.

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²³ Purvis, Karyn. (2019). Institute of Child Development. TBRI and Trauma Informed Classrooms PDF.

²⁴ Purvis, Karyn. (2019). Institute of Child Development. TBRI and Trauma Informed Classrooms PDF.