



A Trauma-Informed Lens to Understand Children's Behavior

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INSTRUCTIONS

This handout was designed for use with the video “When Misbehavior is a Trauma Response” by Dr. Eleonora Cahill. The questions and activities in this handout could be used in a work session (e.g., professional learning community, professional development session), for individual coaching, or for self-reflection.

Goals

- ◆ Understand that children exposed to trauma may exhibit behaviors (externalizing and internalizing) that are maladaptive in the classroom.
- ◆ Explore co-regulation as an effective way to support the behavior of children exposed to trauma.
- ◆ Discuss the importance of your own self-regulation when supporting the behavior of children exposed to trauma.

Activity

- ◆ Watch the video.
- ◆ After watching the video, use the questions below to reflect on how co-regulation supports the classroom behavior of children exposed to trauma.
- ◆ Implement your plan and adjust as needed to support the behavior of children exposed to trauma.

If a child doesn't have those skills and hasn't learned ways to rely on adults, then the adult's job is to help that child and co-regulate.

Dr. Eleonora Cahill

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- ◆ Some children exposed to trauma externalize their feelings by acting in aggressive ways that appear like an overreaction or “a really big response to something really small.”
 - Recall a specific situation (in the classroom or personal) when you overreacted to something that may seem really small to others. What emotions come to you when remembering this situation?
 - What happened before that situation that may have led to your overreaction (e.g., did not sleep well, felt stressed/overwhelmed, had a disagreement with your partner, etc.)?
 - Now think about children exposed to trauma outside of school: the stress they experience may also carry into the classroom and lead to overreactions. How are these children’s overreactions similar or different than yours?
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- ◆ Co-regulation supports children to gradually learn how to regulate their own emotions and behaviors. Dr. Cahill says that “you really can’t co-regulate a child if you’re not regulated.” Use the questions below to reflect:
 - Remember a situation in which you responded to a child’s behavior from a place of anger/frustration.
 - How did you feel? How did the child react to your response? Did your response support that child’s regulation needs? Why or why not?
 - What helps you regulate in the classroom when a child’s aggressive or externalizing behavior pushes your buttons?
 - Identify one concrete strategy that you could use the next time a child displays an aggressive or externalizing behavior (e.g., take a moment, breathe, count to 10).
 - Imagine you use the strategy. In what ways will the use of this strategy help you support that child’s regulatory needs?
 - Plan for how you will remind yourself to use this self-regulation strategy before responding to an externalizing behavior.
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- ◆ Instead of externalizing their feelings, some children exposed to trauma may internalize their feelings by shutting down or “freezing” to become invisible. These children’s behaviors are less disruptive to classroom activities than externalizing ones. However, these children also need your co-regulation to feel safe and build trust to fully engage in the classroom.
 - Think about each child in your classroom. Do you know if they have been exposed to trauma? If so, do any of those children tend to display more internalizing behaviors?
 - In what ways do you think these children may be missed?
 - What teaching practices, if any, have worked for you in the past to tune into these children’s needs?
 - Talk to a colleague to share ideas about ways to support children who tend to display more internalizing behaviors.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Learn more about supporting classroom behavior of children exposed to trauma:

- ◆ **Source:** UC Berkeley's Greater Good in Education
- ◆ **Blog:** Strategies for Teacher Well-being
- ◆ **Link:** <https://ggie.berkeley.edu/trauma-trauma-informed-and-resiliency-informed-schools/>
- ◆ **Description:** Children exposed to trauma need teachers' co-regulation to learn how to regulate their emotions and behaviors. Co-regulation requires that you regulate yourself before supporting children. This blog shares evidence-based strategies for you to take care of yourself.

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- ◆ **Source:** Teachstone
 - ◆ **Webinar:** The Impact of Trauma on Behavior: Seeing Children's Actions as Communication
 - ◆ **Link:** https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G_mZYIpr9II
 - ◆ **Description:** In this webinar, you will dive deeper into understanding how trauma impacts young children's behavior. The presenters discuss: (1) how behaviors are a child's way to share their experiences and communicate with us and (2) how framing children's behavior help us better support them in the classroom.

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- ◆ **Source:** Edutopia
 - ◆ **Article:** Supporting Students Living in Foster Care
 - ◆ **Link:** <https://www.edutopia.org/article/supporting-students-living-foster-care>
 - ◆ **Description:** Young children in foster care may experience behavior challenges in their classrooms. Learn more about how you can understand the past experiences of children in foster care. Use the suggested supportive practices to foster a safe and comfortable early childhood classroom environment.