The Body Keeps Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in The Healing of Trauma

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Epilogue: Choices to be Made, pp. 351 – 358

People can learn to control and change their behavior, but only if they feel safe enough to experiment with new solutions. The body keeps the score: If trauma in encoded in heartbreaking and gut-wrenching sensations, then our first priority is to help people move out of fight-or-flight states, reorganize their perception of danger, and manage relationships. Where traumatized children are concerned, the last things we should be cutting from school schedules are the activities that can do precisely that: chorus, physical education, recess, and anything else that involves movement, play, and other forms of joyful engagement.

I have a family photograph of myself as a five-year-old, perched between my older (obviously wiser) and younger (obviously more dependent) siblings. In the picture I proudly hold up a wooden toy boat, grinning from ear to ear: "See what a wonderful kid I am and see what an incredible boat I have! Wouldn't you love to come and play with me?" All of us, but especially children, need such confidence – confidence that others will know, affirm and cherish us. Without that we can't develop a sense of agency that will enable us to assert: "This is what I believe in; this is what I stand for; this is what I will devote myself to." As long as we feel safely held in the hearts and minds of the people who love us, we will climb mountains and cross deserts and stay up all night to finish projects. Children and adults will do anything for people they trust and whose opinion they value.

The greatest hope for traumatized, abused, and neglected children is to receive a good education in schools where they are seen and known, where they learn to regulate themselves, and where they can develop a sense of agency. At their best, schools can function as islands of safety in a chaotic world. They can teach children how their bodies and brains work and how they can understand and deal with their emotions. Schools can play a significant role in instilling the resilience necessary to deal with the traumas of neighborhoods and families. ***If parents are forced to work two jobs to eke out a living, or if they are too impaired, overwhelmed, or depressed to be attuned to the needs of their kids, schools by default have to be the places where children are taught self-leadership and an internal locus of control*.***

When our team arrives at a school, the teachers' initial response is often some version of "If I'd wanted to be a social worker, I would have gone to social work school. But I came here to be a teacher." Many of them have already learned the hard way, however, that they cannot teach if they have a classroom filled with students whose alarm bells are constantly going off. Even the most committed teachers and school systems often come to feel frustrated and ineffective because so many of their kids are too traumatized to learn. ***Focusing only on improving test scores won't make any difference if teachers can't effectively address the behavior problems of these students. The good news is that the basic principles of trauma-focused intervention***

can be translated into practical day-to-day routines and approaches that can transform the entire culture of a school*.

Most teachers we work with are intrigued to learn that abused and neglected students are likely to interpret any deviation from routine as danger and that their extreme reactions usually are expressions of traumatic stress. Children who defy the rules and unlikely to be brought to reason by verbal reprimands or even suspension – a practice that has become epidemic in American schools. Teachers' perspectives begin to change when they realize that these kids' disturbing behaviors started out as frustrated attempts to communicate distress and as misguided attempts to survive.

More than anything else, being able to feel safe with other people defines mental health; safe connections are fundamental to meaningful and satisfying lives. The critical challenge in the classroom setting is to foster reciprocity: truly hearing and being heard; really seeing and being seen by other people. We try to teach everyone in a school community – office staff, principals, bus drivers, teachers, and cafeteria workers – to recognize and understand the effects of trauma on children and to focus on the importance of fostering safety, predictability, and being known and seen. We make certain that the children are greeted by name every morning and that teachers make face-to-face contact with each and every one of them. Just as in our workshops, group work, and theater programs, we always start the day with check-ins: taking the time to share what's on everybody's mind.

Many of the children we work with have never been able to communicate successfully with language, as they are accustomed to adults who yell, command, sulk, or put earbuds in their ears. One of our first steps is to help their teachers model new ways of talking about feelings, stating expectations, and asking for help. Instead of yelling, "Stop!" when a child is throwing a tantrum or making her sit alone in the corner, teachers are encouraged to notice and name the child's experience, as in "I can see how upset you are"; to give her choices, as in "Would you like to go to the safe spot or sit on my lap?"; and to help her find words to describe her feelings and begin to find her voice, as in: "What will happen when you get home after class?" It may take many months for a child to know when it is safe to speak the truth (because it will never be universally safe), but for children, as for adults, identifying the truth of an experience is essential to healing from trauma.

It is standard practice in many schools to punish children for tantrums, spacing out, or aggressive outbursts – all of which are often symptoms of traumatic stress. When that happens, the school, instead of offering a safe haven, become yet another traumatic trigger. Angry confrontations and punishment can at best temporarily halt unacceptable behaviors, but since the underlying alarm system and stress hormones are not laid to rest, they are certain to erupt again at the next provocation.

In such situations the first step is acknowledging that a child is upset; then the teacher should calm him, then explore the cause and discuss possible solutions. For example, when a first-

grader melts down, hitting his teacher and throwing objects around, we encourage his teacher to set clear limits while gently talking to him: "Would you like to wrap that blanket around you to help you calm down?" (The kid is likely to scream, "No!" but then curl up under the blanket and settle down.) Predictability and clarity of expectations are critical; consistency is essential. Children from chaotic backgrounds often have no idea how people can effectively work together, and inconsistency only promotes further confusion. Trauma-sensitive teachers soon realize that calling a parent about an obstreperous kid is likely to result in a beating and further traumatization.

Our goal in all these efforts is to translate brain science into everyday practice. For example, calming down enough to take charge of ourselves requires activating the brain areas that notice our inner sensations….So a teacher might say: "Shall we take some deep breaths or use the breathing star?" (This is a colorful breathing aid made out of file folders.) Another option might be having a child sit in a corner wrapped in a heavy blanket while listening to some soothing music through headphones. Safe areas can help kids calm down by providing stimulating sensory awareness: the texture of burlap or velvet; show boxes filled with soft brushes and flexible toys. When the child is ready to talk again, he is encouraged to tell someone what is going on before he rejoins the group.

Kids as young as three can blow soap bubbles and learn that when they slow down their breathing to six breaths per minute and focus on the out breath as it flows over their upper lip, they will feel more calm and focused. Our team of yoga teachers works with children nearing adolescence specifically to help them "befriend" their bodies and deal with disruptive physical sensations. We know that one of the prime reasons for habitual drug use in teens is that they cannot stand the physical sensations that signal fear, rage, and helplessness.

Self-regulation can be taught to many kids who cycle between frantic activity and immobility. In addition to reading, writing, and arithmetic, all kids need to learn self-awareness, self-regulation, and communication as part of their core curriculum. Just as we teach history and geography, we need to teach children how their brains and bodies work. For adults and children alike, being in control of ourselves requires becoming familiar with our inner world and accurately identifying what scares, upsets, or delights us.

Emotional intelligence starts with labeling your own feelings and attuning to the emotions of the people around you. We begin very simply: with mirrors. Looking into a mirror helps kids to be aware of what they look like when they are sad, angry, bored, or disappointed. Then we ask them, "How do you feel when you see a face like that?" We teach them how their brains are built, what emotions are for, and where they are registered in their bodies, and how they can communicate their feelings to the people around them. They learn that their facial muscles give clues about what they are feeling and then experiment with how their facial expressions affect other people.

(* My bolding and italics)

We also strengthen the brain's watchtower by teaching them to recognize and name their physical sensations. For example, when their chest tightens, that probably means that they are nervous; their breathing becomes shallow and they feel uptight. What does anger feel like, and what can they do to change that sensation in their body? What happens if they take a deep breath or take time out to jump rope or hit a punching bag? Does tapping acupressure points help? We try to provide children, teachers, and other care providers with a toolbox of ways to take charge of their emotional reactions.

To promote reciprocity, we use other mirroring exercises, which are the foundation of safe interpersonal communication. Kids practice imitating one another's facial expressions. They proceed to imitating gestures and sounds and then get up and move in sync. Games like Simon Says lead to lots of sniggering and giggling – signs of safety and relaxation. When teenagers balk at these "stupid games," we nod understandingly and enlist their cooperation by asking them to demonstrate games to the little kids, who "need their help."

Teachers and leaders learn that an activity as simple as trying to keep a beach ball in the air as long as possible helps groups become more focused, cohesive, and fun. These are inexpensive interventions. For older children some schools have installed workstations costing less than two hundred dollars where students can play computer games to help them focus and to improve their heart rate variability (HRV), just as we do in our own clinic.

Children and adults alike need to experience how rewarding it is to work at the edge of their abilities. Resilience is the product of agency: knowing that what you do can make a difference. Many of us remember what playing team sports, singing in the school choir, or playing in the marching band meant to us, especially if we had coaches or directors who believed in us, pushed us to excel, and taught us we could be better than we thought was possible. The children we reach need this experience.

Athletics, playing music, dancing, and theatrical performances all promote agency and community. They also engage kids in novel challenges and unaccustomed roles….These intense communal efforts force kids to collaborate, compromise, and stay focused on the task at hand. Tensions often run high, but the kids stick with it because they want to earn the respect of their coaches or directors and don't want to let down the team – all feelings that are opposite to the vulnerability of being subjected to arbitrary abuse, the invisibility of neglect and the godforsaken isolation of trauma.

[These] programs are working: Kids become less anxious and emotionally reactive and are less aggressive or withdrawn; they get along better and their school performance improves; their attention deficit, hyperactivity, and "oppositional defiant" problems decrease; and parents report that their children are sleeping better. Terrible things still happen to them and around them, but they are now able to talk about these events; they have built up the trust and resources to seek the help they need. Interventions are successful if they draw on our natural wellsprings of cooperation and on our inborn responses to safety, reciprocity, and imagination.