The Early Childhood Newsletter—Mental Health Edition

How Preschools Can Heal—Making Room for an Emotional Life in Your Center

Inside this issue:

Teacher as Instructor 2
Additional Resources 2
Teacher as Surrogate Caregiver 3
Tools of Preschools that Heal 3
Teacher as Limit-Setter 4

Teacher as Therapist 4

“IT IS, UNFORTUNATELY, INCREASINGLY COMMON TO SEE CHILDREN WHOSE OPPORTUNITY TO ATTACH HAS BEEN SEVERELY LIMITED, DISRUPTED, OR ARRESTED.”

Lesley Koplow

The Role of a Therapeutic Teacher

Many children who have experienced trauma in their lives have not had the opportunity or the capacity to engage in a healthy primary relationship. Relationships must be the starting point and the context within which healing occurs. Therapeutic teachers find themselves in a complex role in which they wear many hats:

Teacher as Instructor
Teacher as Surrogate Caregiver
Teacher as Limit Setter
Teacher as Therapist

Teacher as Instructor

By meeting each child at their level of cognitive development, the teacher facilitates the integration of cognition and emotion by relating a child’s learning activities to their personal experiences. By promoting the child’s mastery of certain concepts and skills, s/he fulfills the child’s needs for mastery and autonomy. It might go something like this:

Paul: I can’t do it!

Teacher: You seem frustrated, but I’ll bet you can do it. Let me show you, and then let’s see if you can do it by yourself.

Paul: I did it!

Teacher: That made you happy. What are you going to make?

Paul: A house.

Teacher: You made a red house.

Paul: I’m gonna make another house.

Teacher: What color are you going to make this one?

Paul: Green (picking up the blue piece).

Teacher: Is that green? Let’s see… it’s the same color as our sneakers. Do you remember what that color is called? That’s bl…

Paul: Blue! (Paul completes the second house and puts a little boy in one, along with a mommy, a little girl, and a baby. In the other house, he puts a daddy figure.)

Teacher: That’s like your family. You live with Mommy, Veronica, and Shawna, and Daddy lives in a different house now.


“"The therapeutic classroom is a place where troubled children are helped to sort out their complicated experiences so that development can proceed.”
Judith Ferber

Additional Resources...

The Child Trauma Academy—www.childtrauma.org
National Child Traumatic Stress Network—www.netsn.org
Child Witness to Violence Project—www.childwitnessstoviolence.org
teacher as surrogate caregiver

Some children have had difficulty entering fully into relationships. The teacher as surrogate caregiver will actively attempt to bring such children into relationship with them by engaging in activities such as reciprocal play, mirroring, peek-a-boo, and hide-and-seek. These are activities that children typically use at earlier developmental stages to develop a sense of self. Other children have the capacity but have not had the stable attachment figure available to them. The teacher as surrogate caregiver offers such children permission to express their dependency needs and makes herself available as a stable and nurturing attachment figure. In this way, she provides a corrective experience in which the child’s dependency needs are met in appropriate ways. For example, whenever a teacher went out of the room without her, four year old Julie would panic and cry inconsolably. During transitions, she would become anxious and run around the classroom and climb on the furniture, testing to see if an adult would come protect her. The teachers helped Julie learn that she could ask to sit on their lap when she was feeling worried. They played other games that involved going away and coming back to reinforce ‘object constancy.’ By remaining consistently available to Julie as she worked through these developmental processes, they were able to help Julie establish a sense of security and trust in the relationship.

Tools of Preschools that Heal

Reflective Language—verbal reflections can range from a literal repetition of what the child said to a more complex reflection of content or affect. For example:

Child: I don’t want to come to school
Teacher (empathically): Sounds like you didn’t want to come to school today.
Child: Ana didn’t go to school!
Teacher: Oh! Ana stayed home with Mommy?
Child (nods): I want to stay with Mommy too.
Teacher: Ana stayed home and you had to come to school. You sound angry about that. Do you want to write a letter to Mommy to tell her how you feel?
Child nods, takes his teacher’s hand and they walk to the writing center

Techniques that invite expression—opportunities for symbolic play, e.g., drawing, painting, PlayDoh, dolls and figurines, etc.

Behavioral Feedback—research shows that preschool children who organize themselves around earning a reward/sticker may become less involved in understanding why they are doing what they are doing and learning a replacement behavior. On the other hand, when a teacher increases a child’s awareness of their behaviors, by teaching and providing information, the child understands and is invested in behaving differently.

Teacher as Limit-Setter

While there will be many opportunities for the teacher to follow the child’s agenda, the therapeutic teacher must also place himself in the role of limit-setter and reality-tester for a young child. S/he must manage the needs of a group of children for many hours in the day and must make demands on the child to conform to certain routines and limits. In this way, she is responsible for enforcing a reality. Developmentally, children need to repeatedly come up against a parental “no” in order to establish themselves as separate and autonomous.

Limit-setting, which is done within the context of a supportive relationship, can also be corrective for children who come from homes where adults exert authority in ways that might be hurtful and/or frightening. Joey is hitting another child who refuses to get off of the bike he perceives as his. His teacher intervenes.

Teacher (holding Joey’s arms): “I’m going to help you stop hitting. Hitting hurts. Let’s see if you can stop yourself and find words instead of hitting.”

Joey: “Get offa me! Get offa me! (breaking loose, he runs across the room and picks up a block to throw at the teacher. Teacher stops him and carries him to a chair.)

Teacher: “Let’s take some time and talk about what’s happening. You seem really scared. Are you afraid I’m going to hurt you?”

Joey: “Yes! You’re hurting me!”

Teacher: “Maybe it feels as if I’m hurting you. I’m not going to hurt you though. I am going to help you stop hitting because hitting hurts and we need to make sure everyone stays safe.”


Teacher as Therapist

The teacher as therapist is going to be the “interpreter of experience.” In this way, they help the child who has had traumatic or emotionally overwhelming experiences in their lives sort out what has happened to them.

As children represent their experiences through play and art symbols, the therapeutic teacher will help a child elaborate and connect the experiences represented to real emotions and sometimes to real life events. S/he enables that child to sort out confusing and powerful experiences. Their relationship contains these experiences and the child’s powerful feelings around them.

Juan, a 4 year old boy with separation anxiety who was separated from his mother at 1 year and brought from Honduras by his father to live in the Allentown area. He recently began to experience some behavioral regression due to learning that his father would be going on a 2 month trip back to Honduras without Juan. At the end of each day, he would become highly anxious, screaming and crying in distress. During free play, Juan plays with a toy plane and people.

Juan: “I’m leaving… I’m going away.”

Teacher: “Don’t go Daddy! Don’t leave me, I want to go with you!”

Juan: “You shut up, you’re not coming with me. Now don’t be a baby.”

Teacher: “But I’m afraid you won’t come back.”

Juan: “Oh, all right… Wait, wait… I come back. (He flies the plane back to the little boy figure.) See? I come back. Now don’t you worry.”

Teacher: “Maybe you are worrying about how your daddy is going to go away on a plane. But your daddy will come back too.”