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Counsellors' Corner

Trauma and Felt-Safety During Unsettling Times

Supporting Your Child Through Unsettling Times

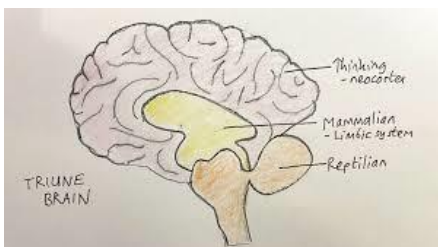
The last two years have brought with them what, at best, can be referred to as unsettling times in our world. We've never had to navigate a world pandemic in our lifetime, nor have we witnessed or been part of a war in which images are in front of us in real-time. The news has been flooded lately with fires, floods, world disasters, and threats to our safety. It's hard to know how to navigate this in a healthy way as adults; even more concerning is how to support our children through it in a way that doesn't have negative long-term effects. Social media brings with it a new dimension; TikTok is flooded with videos of citizens posting from Ukraine as missiles fly over their heads. Although our children may have been exposed to similar images on video games, the reality of the world we are living in adds an extra layer of fear, uncertainty, and potential trauma. On a more personal level (and possibly just as distressing) are: the worries of security regarding our health due to the pandemic, the divide of our nation around regulations and mandates, the state of the economy with many people losing their housing and struggling with paying bills/sustaining a comfortable lifestyle for their family, and the feeling of inadequacy regarding the ability to manage it all in a healthy way for our children. It all sounds distressing and too much to bear; however, we have some suggestions on what to focus on for your children *that is within your control* as you navigate the day-to-day of parenthood.

What's Happening for Children and Youth That We See (Behaviour)

- Children and youth (and adults too!) are experiencing many emotions: fear, overwhelm, anxiety, anger, grief, worry, sadness, and loneliness. The list is endless. The underlying sensation is a lack of safety and control. In this newsletter, we refer to safety as a "**felt safety**." Our students/children may be safe; however, their perceived safety is what drives behaviours and emotions.
- Behaviours are the body's response to stressful situations. Behaviours are not intentional when responding to stress or trauma; they are the child's way to cope with a difficult situation. If the child had more effective coping skills, they would use them.
- Depending on levels of exposure to family and world stressors, children feel a sense of not being in control. Children may become more rigid in their ability to control "something" as a result. This can be interpreted as *defiance, wilfulness, disrespect*; however, it is likely there is more going on. We operate from the foundational belief that if kids can do well, they will.
- School challenges may increase, attendance and/or engagement may decrease.
- Friendship issues may arise as well as increased concerns for mental health.
- Addictions (screens, substances) may increase; sleep, nutrition and healthy boundaries may decrease.

What's Happening for Children and Youth That We Don't See (Neuroscience)

- Consider the three main parts of our brain:



Reptilian Brain – The part of our brain that knows how to freeze (play dead), flop (faint-like), or completely shut down. This part of our brain engages when it believes there is little to no chance of survival. When our reptilian brain is engaged, the "thinking" part of our brain doesn't function (i.e., making good choices, considering options, planning for the future). This reptilian part of our brain is also known as "*survival brain*" as its whole purpose is to keep the organism safe and alive.

Mammalian Brain – The part of our brain that knows how to fight, flee, and fawn. This part of our brain engages when it believes there is a

chance for survival, so it resorts to fighting, running away, or placating/trying to please everyone to return harmony to the system. This part of the brain is also known as the "*limbic brain*," or "*emotion/feeling brain*."

Safety Brain – The part of our brain that is activated when feeling safe. This is when there is a desire to connect and be part of something bigger than self. In this state, we are more curious, creative, bold, socially connected, calm, and feel like we belong. We have empathy and feel connected to our family, community, and world. This part of our brain is also known as our "*executive functioning*" or "*frontal lobe*."

How Do I Help...Prioritize Safety (for teachers and school staff)

Reflect:

- Start the process of coming back to the brain; ask yourself, "What area of the brain is activated in my child/student right now" (based on the descriptions above). Notice that the first two have in common a **sense of feeling unsafe**.
- Ask yourself, "What is contributing to the sense of danger for my child/student?" Consider how to minimize this feeling. Are they being exposed to news too frequently? Is social media making them hyper-aware of what is going on in the world? Am I talking about the state of the world in my home/classroom in a way that my child/youth/student's safety is feeling threatened? Has my child had a trauma in the past that might be impacting their feelings, thoughts, and behaviours right now?
- Self-awareness check – As the adult, ask yourself, *How Am I Feeling? What part of my brain is activated? What do I need?* This step is crucial to the adult's ability to support a child/youth/student or even another adult. Helping another feel a sense of safety is called *co-regulation*. We do this so that the unregulated child/youth/student can sense the adult's calm rather than become escalated by the adult's emotional state and reaction to the behaviour.



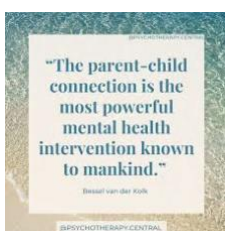
Regulate:

- Walk/move your body – stand, walk outside or to another part of the room, drop your shoulders
- Relax your face, shoulders, arms, torso, legs.
- Breathe – there are a few breathing techniques that will trigger your parasympathetic nervous system and bring calm (trust us, they work! 😊😊). A few favourites are to breath out a few counts longer than your breath in (e.g., In for 5, out for 10) or Square Breathing, in for 4, hold for 4, out for 4, hold for 4.
- Move to an area of calmness and low sensory input. Play soothing music if it helps.
- Notice your senses: recognize one thing you can see, hear, taste, smell, feel.
- Have a drink of water or healthy snack – perhaps offer this to the child/youth you are supporting.
- **If you are unable to regulate, which is understandable, switch with another calm adult (family member, teacher, EA, school counsellor, administrator). Have self-compassion; don't take the behaviours personally.**
- **If you are in a situation where there is not an adult to support you, and the child/youth is not in danger, shelve the issue and come back to it when both you and the child/youth are feeling safe. If help is needed from the school or a community professional, please reach out.**



Respond:

- Reminders to Provide "Cues of Relational Safety" (Beyond Behaviours, Dr. Mona Delahooke, PhD).



- Presence – Am I present to my child and attending to their needs?
- Tone of Voice – is my voice appropriate to my child's needs?
- Facial Expression – does my expression send messages of safety and engagement?
- Pacing and Timing – Am I attuned to my child's needs?
- Posture – is it relaxed and inviting?

- Connect with your child/youth/student in a place/time/space that has low sensory input (no screens, low light, low sound). This might be driving on a country road, lying in bed next to them, in front of the fireplace with a cup of tea, etc. **Use very little language**. Try not to take over the conversation with your ideas. Ask open-ended questions (questions that can't be answered with just "yes" or "no,") such as, "What are your teachers saying about the pandemic? What are your friends' understandings about what is happening with Russia and Ukraine right now? How is this impacting you?" Avoid correcting your child (e.g., if they say, "I'm terrified that we will engage in the war too," instead of saying, "That's unlikely to happen," try saying, "I can see why that would be a terrifying feeling. Can I share with you what I read about that?")
- In all your conversations and situations at home, prioritize safety. Model safety in your language, "I am so happy to be home, cozy and safe with my family after a busy day," "I know school can feel so hectic; I am appreciative that your EA and teacher really care about your well-being and are there to help you stay safe."
- Consider dealing with any conflictual situations that don't involve your child/youth/student directly out of earshot of your child. Focus on peace and safety in their presence, particularly if they are feeling anxious, worried, threatened, or perseverating on unsettling events.

- Ask your child/youth/student, “When/where/with whom do you feel the safest?” “What can I do as your parent to help you feel that way more often?” “What can your teacher do?” Then try to do it, without feeling defensive. Sometimes children/youth/students might say, “You yell too much with an angry face and that scares me.” The point isn’t necessarily that you yell or have an angry face, it is that the child is feeling threatened; meaning that they are moving backward into that mammalian or reptilian brain. You can bring them back to their executive functioning brain by reassuring them that you are listening and trying to make them feel safe.
- Try to be realistic about any situation that could cause fear or trauma for your child/youth/student; don’t sugar coat it, but don’t make it the central part of their life either. Answer questions honestly to the best of your ability, without embellishing or providing more information than they are seeking.
- Use language that is age appropriate.
- Specific to school and school staff:
 - Be aware of the underlying stories, challenges, traumas, level of support of your students.
 - Gauge your conversations so that they are age appropriate.
 - Limit the amount of time you spend discussing world events. If the child’s home is immersed in the conversation, school should be a place of respite.
 - Observe any changes in students’ behaviours, mood, eating, energy levels, socializing, work habits. If concerned, check in with them, communicate your concerns with home and the school counsellor.
 - Plan your days with a balance of structure and predictability; yet, flexibility for those times when a change is needed.
 - Offer opportunities for body breaks, nutrition breaks for students as needed.
 - Offer academic and emotional supports/adaptations when required.
- Avoid:
 - ...using technology as an escape. Children/youth need to develop coping skills for discomfort (which then develop resilience). We don’t want to encourage hiding from the world, we want to teach our children/youth/students to balance perspective with coping.
 - ...raising your voice, punishing
 - ...getting frustrated and claiming, “These strategies don’t work!” if your child doesn’t have an open dialogue with you. This takes practice.
 - ...staying in a conversation/situation where the dialogue is escalating. Wrap the conversation up with an assurance that you can come back to it the next day and assure your child/youth/student you aren’t angry, and they are safe.
 - ...panicking if children revert in behaviours due to a feeling of being unsafe (e.g., wanting to sleep in your bedroom, not wanting to go to school, avoiding playdates/social situations). These are likely temporary and with an increased feeling of safety, will go away on their own.
 - ...distancing yourself from your child when you don’t approve of their behaviour or emotional reactions. “Connection is what regulates us” (Peter Levine 2021).

If you are feeling that your child is stuck in a state of fear/panic, please contact your school counsellor or community counsellor for assistance.



“Stay Connected”

Tara and Bridget

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