

## How to Create an Emotionally Safe Classroom Using Psychological First Aid

Trauma makes warriors of us all. One of the toughest warriors I ever met was Nathan, a 4th grader who could launch into a tirade with a flashpoint rage beyond any imaginable provocation for such behavior. One day it might have been a math problem that triggered him to scream expletives and throw pencils. On another day, someone might have looked at him the wrong way, prompting him to shove his desk into the back wall and threaten anyone else who "got in his face." Despite this behavior, school staff genuinely liked Nathan. They didn't want to fear him; they wanted to help him.

Most teachers try to create emotionally safe classroom environments, but students with few resources for emotional regulation and self-control and high amounts of toxic stress challenge our noble intentions and efforts. Robert Macy, president of the International Trauma Center defines psychological trauma as "an overwhelming demand on an individual's physiological system that results in a profound sense of loss of control, vulnerability, and immobilization." Many teachers see their "Nathans" dismantle the rules, the quiet corners, the peacekeeping table, the peer-to-peer conflict mediations, and their disciplinary measures. Inevitably, frustration plunges us down the slippery slope of emotional reactivity only to land in the minefield of power and control. To help our Nathans—and really, to provide a safe, stable learning environment for all students—we teachers, who are on the front lines every day as first responders to the "psychological" emergencies that erupt in our classrooms, must also be trauma sensitive and trauma responsive.

### **A Need to Feel Safe**

As an on-site education coach/consultant at Nathan's school, I was in a unique position to see beyond his behavior and respond to the emotional substory. Children like Nathan can be easily triggered into feeling vulnerable, helpless, and out of control. As trauma researcher Bessel Van der Kolk (2014) explains in his book *The Body Keeps The Score*, "The trauma may be over, but it keeps being replayed in continually recycling memories and in a reorganized nervous system" (p. 175). Long after the traumatic event, the reorganized nervous system keeps pumping out stress hormones in response to real or imagined threats, which results in physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral problems.

Understandably, when Nathan's trauma was triggered, he resorted to stress-reactive behaviors. These reactions were attempts to relieve distress and get to safety, and while they may work in the moment, in the long term they are maladaptive. A common misconception among caregivers is to believe that the purpose of the reaction is to get out of a situation. Trauma researchers now note that the reaction is an attempt to get to safety and relieve the emotional and physical sense of distress.

## **Eight Core Actions**

Nathan wanted to feel safe, secure, stable, and in control. I happened to have this insight about him on the day his behavior was escalating into a desk-overturning rage. To intervene with Nathan, I used Psychological First Aid (PFA), a disaster-response approach that provides helpful assistance to people in distress in a nonjudgmental, compassionate, and practical manner. PFA consists of eight core actions that reduce initial distress and foster short- and long-term adaptive functioning.

## **Contact and Engagement**

In his initial moment of distress, I calmly approached Nathan and whispered in a nonthreatening way, "Would a walk help?" All eyes were on him—and me! Perhaps it was the novelty of my approach or maybe he recognized a calming presence. He nodded and I walked beside him to the door as a human shield protecting him from the stares and comments of his classmates.

## **Safety and Comfort**

As soon as we got out the door, Nathan balked, "You're not taking me to the office." "That's right," I said. "Let's just walk." Halfway down the corridor, he quieted a bit. "Is there anything else I can do to help?" I asked. He looked at the floor. "Is there anything you need?" I continued. He didn't have any answers. It didn't matter. I'd asked the helpful questions that let him know I was there for him and that he was in control of what happened next.

## **Stabilization**

When we reached the stairwell, I coached Nathan on how to take calming breaths. After a minute, I asked him, "What do you notice about this space we are in?" "Quiet," he said. His eyes lit up and his face filled with an expression of wonder and awe. I then asked him how his body felt. He looked at me as if I had just given him the keys to his inner kingdom. This was a big "aha moment" for Nathan. He learned that he could quiet himself, that he had some control over the situation, and that the sense of urgency and distress that frequently overwhelmed him was not insurmountable. He felt peace in his body.

## **Information Gathering: Needs and Current Concerns**

I had no illusions or magical thinking. Calming breaths help us disengage from survival-driven reactions, but they do not necessarily get us safely to the place where we can be responsive to our situations rather than reactive and at their mercy. I asked Nathan if he'd like to go somewhere to talk so that he could help me understand what he needed.

## **Practical Assistance**

To my surprise, he suggested the vice principal's office! He spent a lot of time there, felt comfortable and heard, and also received some good, orderly direction.

## **Connection with Social Supports**

We chatted with the vice principal's administrative assistant while waiting to go into the office. I asked Nathan if he wanted to teach her the calming breath. He was thrilled. After he'd finished showing her, I asked if she could breathe with him whenever he came to the office, thus establishing future opportunities for connection and social support.

## Information on Coping

The vice principal, Nathan, and I had a conversation about other things that helped Nathan. We established a plan for leaving an upsetting situation before it exploded and discussed additional breathing and grounding techniques such as counting floor tiles. We helped him identify tools to better cope when a similar situation arises in the future.

## Linkage with Collaborative Services

Finally, to put these plans into effect, we needed to establish links to collaborative services that would help Nathan when he is experiencing trauma. With the help of the vice principal, we identified other staff members who would help support our plan.

Throughout these eight steps, Nathan was authentically involved and in control of this truly trauma-responsive and empathetic approach. PFA works because it fully embraces an individual's need for personal safety and relief from the discomfort of the sense of urgency and distress. When we take this approach, we can give children who are overloaded with toxic stress and trauma what they need to engage in school. We can give them long-term strategies that help them be both safe and successful.

## Reference

Van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. New York: Penguin Books.

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