

--- Intro ---

You are listening to Supporting Supporters, a ChangetoChill podcast. This is a free mental well-being resource offered by Allina Health. My name is Tonya Freeman. I'm a licensed psychologist and regional lead psychologist with Allina Health.

These podcast episodes are aimed with the goal of providing quick, tangible resources and information from Allina Health mental health providers on a range of mental health topics relevant to day to day lives of the listener. We invite you to join us in any way you please, whether you sit back and kick your feet up, or as you engage in movement, your daily commute, or as you prepare for your day. However you choose to join us, we welcome you and we honor your time.

--- Episode ---

Hello, and thank you so much for having me as part of this podcast project. My name is Jamie Zander and I am a psychologist with Allina Health. I primarily work with children, adolescents, and families, and mostly school-aged kids. I was drawn to this project because throughout my work, I know how valuable and influential teachers are in child development. So before I even get started, I want to say thank you so much for the important work that you all do to provide a safe and supportive learning environment for your students. You have been asked to do some challenging and incredible work over the past few years and I continue to be both impressed and grateful for your ongoing collaboration and the amazing work you all do.

In this episode, I am going to talk about trauma and how to work with children who have experienced trauma throughout their development. The subject of trauma is extensive and can be difficult to fully cover and understand in a short discussion. Today, I plan to discuss some general strategies to working with children through a trauma informed lens.

Trauma is a broad word to describe a variety of experiences that can range from a threatening of safety to self or others to inconsistencies and instability throughout development. The National Child Traumatic Stress network defines trauma as "an experience that threatens life or physical integrity and that overwhelms an individual's capacity to cope." Some of these stressors can be single traumatic events, while others can be chronic and persist throughout the course of development. It is important to note that what is defined as trauma is subjective and determined by the experience of the child. So what may be considered "traumatic" for one child may not be for another based on experiences, culture, values, etc. Just as the experiences of trauma can range, the reactions to traumatic events can also vary, so it is important to know that there can be a wide variety of trauma responses.

When I think about working with children in the classroom environment who have a history of trauma or inconsistencies, I always think about remembering to use the 3 R's:

1. Regulate
2. Relate
3. Reason

The 3 R's are based on Dr. Bruce Perry's work, who is a leading psychiatrist in developmental trauma. He has shown that in order to help a child think and learn, it is important to intervene in a series that corresponds with what is currently happening in the child's brain. The 3 R's can also be used with any child who is experiencing any sort of emotional or behavioral dysregulation.

1. Regulate

When we think about emotional dysregulation, we know that the fight/flight/freeze/fall response is activated and the problem-solving and reasoning centers of our brain go offline. This is when children go into what we think of as "survival mode." Therefore, before doing anything else, we first want to focus on calming or regulating the nervous system.

There are many ways to regulate, and I am going to focus on just a few that can be done in the school setting. Often, children will look to co-regulate, which essentially means that children need to regulate their physical and emotional state in the presence of a regulated adult. Children need to know that there is an adult who can handle their intense feelings, because they are believing themselves incapable of managing them on their own. Therefore, the most important thing you can do as a teacher is stay regulated yourself, and remaining in a calm state and neutral in your tone and words. Don't get me wrong, this can be a difficult thing to do, and if you are experiencing difficulty remaining calm, enlist a colleague for support or engage in a self-regulating strategy yourself.

Additionally, diaphragmatic breathing or "belly breathing" is an extremely useful tool to promote regulation. Deep breathing that fully engages the stomach, diaphragm, and abdominal muscles will slow down our pace of breathing, and activate our parasympathetic nervous system, which promotes rest and digest conditions.

Another tool that can be useful is focusing on grounding, or bringing the child back into the room and the present moment. Often, when a trauma response is activated, the brain has a difficult time deciphering between safe and unsafe environments. One thing I often do with children in my practice is help them name things they see around the room. For example, looking around my room I see my computer, a phone, water bottle, pens, whiteboard, and so on. One thing that can be useful is having children say these things out loud over and over until they seem more calm and regulated. I think it is also useful to demonstrate this for children and to normalize that it might seem a little goofy in the beginning.

2. Relate

The second R focuses primarily on connection and attunement to the child's feelings. This helps promote the understanding that the child is in the presence of a safe and attuned adult. I think this is the step most often forgot and overlooked, and is vital to get to the next step of problem solving and reflecting. This can be done by getting down on the child's level, and speaking in a calm, neutral manner. The most important thing here is to focus on feeling validation, which is different than behavior validation. Feeling validation is when an adult says to the child "I can see that you really upset right now. You did not want to work with Johnny." This shows the child that you see them and you can understand that they are upset. The goal here is to connect with the child and help them feel more comfortable with you.

3. Reasoning

Finally, when the child appears more emotionally and physically steady, more comfortable in conversation with you, they are ready to engage in problem solving, reflecting, and reasoning. When entering this stage, there are many different ways to help the child reflect on behaviors that he could have done differently or develop strategies to move forward. During this time, I like to focus on

collaborative problem-solving. This can include providing choices or allowing the child to take the lead on developing solutions. This can be as simple as stating "It is important for you to keep playing. It is important for me that you join circle time with the class. How can we figure this out so both are needs get met?" This can also be a time for reflection and learning. This may be a time to talk about how the situation could be managed differently or model communication strategies for the future.

So hopefully you found this helpful in understanding some basic principles in working with children who have experienced trauma, or really any child who is experiencing any sort of emotional or behavioral dysregulation. It's important to remember the 3 R's: regulate, relate, and reason. Regulating and first helping the child calm down and manage intense emotions. Second, to relate. Connect with the child and attune to their feelings. And finally, when the child is seeming more calm and you're feeling a connection with the child, we can engage the reasoning – the problem-solving and the reflecting on how future behaviors may be different.

Thank you so much for your time and your commitment to your students. I so appreciate being a part of this and hope to talk to you again soon in the future. Thank you.

---Outro---

On behalf of Allina Health and Change to Chill, we thank you for taking the time to listen to our podcast. We do hope you enjoyed this episode and we hope that you join us in other episodes covering even more interesting topics with mental health providers. As always, you can find the show notes and any accompanying research and tools at the change to chill website at www.changetochill.org. In health and wellness, take care and see you next time!