

Resilience: Built in and Lived in Relationships



**HOW TOXIC STRESS AND ANXIETY
IMPACT STUDENT FUNCTIONING AND
WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT IT**



**REINHILD BOEHME, LISW-S
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, CLINICAL IMPACT AND INNOVATION
OHIOGUIDESTONE**

Reinhild.Boehme@ohioguidestone.org



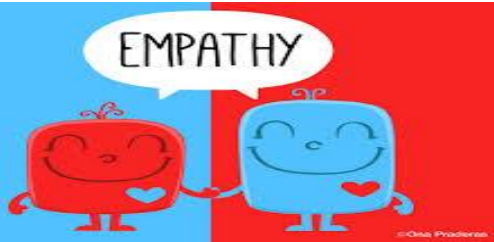
The Story of Aaron



Aaron was trouble from day one. He would not sit still, he would not listen, and he would not keep his hands to himself. Unbeknownst to his teacher Aaron witnessed violence often in his home and sometimes became the target of it. What did his principal do?

- She played chess with him. Twice a week. All through elementary school.
- She assigned him a leadership role (raising the flag).

Aaron went through the AVID Program and just finished his first year of college.



The Good News



Resilience is learned and lived in relationships.
You are in a great position to teach resilience.
You see the kids every day. Many hours.

What you don't need:

- Very specialized skills.
- Hours of your day to teach a program.

What you do need:

- To be your empathic, connected, calm self.

More Good News



Activity List			
Project:		Project Manager:	
Date Prepared:		Last Updated:	
WBS ID	Activity Name	Activity Description	Assigned Resource

Resilience building does not require you to follow a prescribed course of activities or teach your students a long list of skills.

It’s not a course. It’s not a class.

Resilience is built through the way you are with your students:

- Calm
- Connected
- Present
- Caring
- Clear

There are a lot of things you can do to build resilience. What they are depends of your classroom and the children in it.

Be a gardener! Seeds of Empathy...



First:
You plant. You water.

Then:
You plant together. You water together.

Then:
They plant. They water.

Last: Have a garden party.

It's not just you.
There are many gardeners.
You get the seeds somewhere.
What you sow, will be passed on.
Sow compassion and connection.

Empathy: How is it done?



RSA
SHORT



What do you see? What do you hear? What action is taken?
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw>

Connect Every Day:



Begin with yourself and each other.

Get connected.

Get to the present moment.

Get to acceptance.

Get to calm.

Examples?

- Look at a picture.
- Breathe.
- Smell perfume.
- Take time to enjoy a bite.

None of this takes a lot of time.



Connect Every Day: Your students...



- Make eye contact (but not too much).
- Take three deep breaths together before class.
- Look at a beautiful image together.

Embody (be) resilience.

Do you have to be perfect?

No. Every moment is a learning opportunity.

Regroup.

Do the next right thing.

Talk it out loudly.

To many of your students you are that one sane adult. Connecting with them empathically is the greatest gift you can give them. It is also the greatest gift you can give yourself.

Beginning the Day in Your Classroom: Attuning to the Senses



Using sound to be here now:

If your students can tolerate it:

Sound a bell, ask students to slowly raise their hand when they no longer hear the sound of the bell.

Skills practiced:

- Attention to environment.
- Following directions.
- Moving body calmly.
- Paying attention to sensory input.

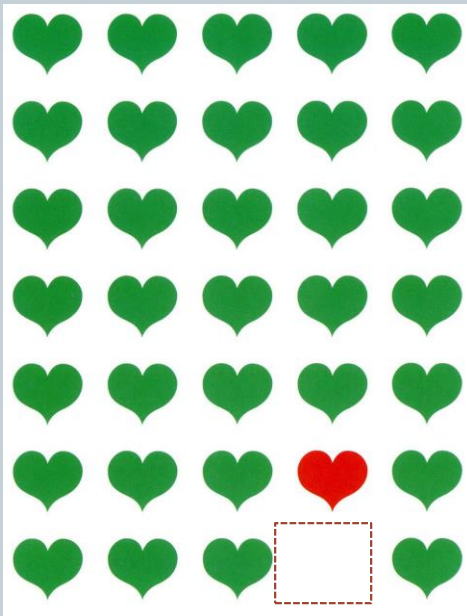
Sensory input (the right kind) calms and soothes the body/brain.

**If your student is not willing/can't tolerate music:
Use your voice to help student soothe.**

When would you use the bell?



- Do you have to be able to think perfectly?
- Do the kids have to be happy?
- Do they have to be calm already?



Establish a routine.
Ring the bell every day.

Over time students will begin to expect this.
They will know what to expect.

One day, they will no longer expect hurt from you.
One day they will expect empathy and connection.

Keep at it!

What is Anxiety?



Anxiety can manifest in different ways behaviorally!

What we are moving away from:

- Thinking of anxiety as just a psychological problem.

What we now know:

- Anxiety is a full body experience.
- Driven by survival instinct.
- It lives deep in the brain.
- The brain messages the body via powerful neurotransmitters/hormones.
- This response is involuntary, meaning you can't talk someone out of having the response.



Anxiety is a response to real/perceived danger. Toxic Stress makes children more vulnerable to a heightened neurobiological anxiety response.

Be Here Now: Music



If you are “here now” you are not “there and then” (in a trauma state).

Soothing Music Time

Institute Soothing Music Time. Play relaxation music for 3 minutes and give your students permission to slowly move their arms to the music. Show them how to do this.

Be sure students are “spaced” right and place students who need to be close to you near you.

Skills:

- Listening, following directions.
- Calming/Mindfulness
- Sensory Awareness.

Take a Trip! Lily's Dream



- Every night Lilly sits on her bed and thinks.
- She thinks about her mother and worries.
- She thinks about her father and worries.
- She thinks about school and worries.
- Lilly worries every night and she cannot stop.
- Tonight is just the same.
- Lilly hears a sound. A gently breeze blows a leaf into her room.
- Lilly hears laughter. Lilly hears tiny voices talk.
- Lilly looks around. Little feet stick out from under the leaf on the floor of her room. “Who are you”, asks Lilly. “Show yourself.”
- From under the leaf three little elves peek out.
- “I am Niebel”, says the first elf and bows to Lilly. “I am Nobel” says the second elf. “And I am Nubel,” says elf number three.
- “We are here to help you travel to Wonderland. Just hop on our leaf.”
- And Lilly does. She shrinks and shrinks and shrinks and steps onto the leaf.
- Gently, the leaf lifts off the ground and floats out the window.
- Lilly sees the stars. Lilly sees the moon. Lilly breathes the cool night air.

Tell a Story: Safety and Connection.



- Niebel and Nobel hold her hand while Nubel steers the leaf.
- Nubel points at a tree. “Prepare for landing”, he says.
- The leaf floats towards towards a nest.
- Lilly and her friends land in the nest. It is a soft landing. A friendly bird greets them: “Welcome,” says the bird. “I am getting ready to rest for the night.
- Stay a while.”
- Lilly is sleepy. She rests her tiny body in the nest. Niebel, Nobel, and Nubel
- next to her, she falls asleep. Never has a bed felt so soft. Lilly falls asleep with a smile.
- Lilly wakes up back in her bed. A bird sits on her window sill.
- She knows this bird. Lilly smiles. Lilly can’t wait to visit Wonderland again tonight.

How about this student?



How can we start with compassion, even with the most difficult of students? Here is where a look at our students' lived realities of stressful lives can help. Not an excuse for behavior, rather an explanation that drives our compassion.

What is different about this student?

- As he is older we tend to assign more “blame” to him.
- This is the same kid, but we have less compassion.
- Fine line between holding someone responsible (which is needed) and understanding the roots of behavior.
- When kids are younger we tend to put blame on their parents and still feel compassion for them (it is not their fault). This often decreases when children get older.
- Engages in high-risk behaviors to feel alive...

Model 1: Chronic Activation of Stress Response



Children who live with Chronic Toxic Stress and or are born with a genetic predisposition for anxiety can be in a chronic anxious state.

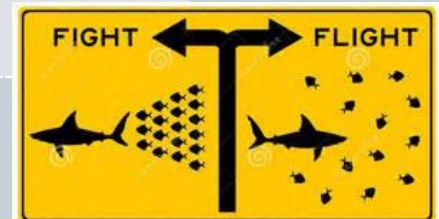
- This is a *physical neurobiological response* that the child cannot control. This is a brain based process. Activation of the stress response system happens through 2 major channels:

Amygdala, high alert, activates fight/flight response, danger real or perceived

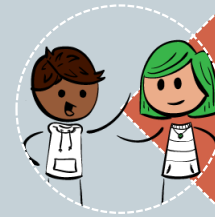
- Involuntary Response!

HPA-Axis, body gets flooded with stress hormones

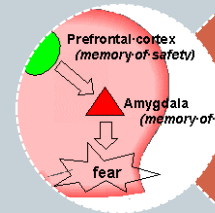
- Involuntary Response



Polyvagal Theory: What to do...



The thinking brain is on!
We can talk!



Survival Mode:
Emotions and Thought
are Nonessential. We
can't use reason and
language very well.



Fear of Imminent Death”
Limbic System is in
Control.

None of this is by choice, this is a biological response!

Polyvagal Theory In Action



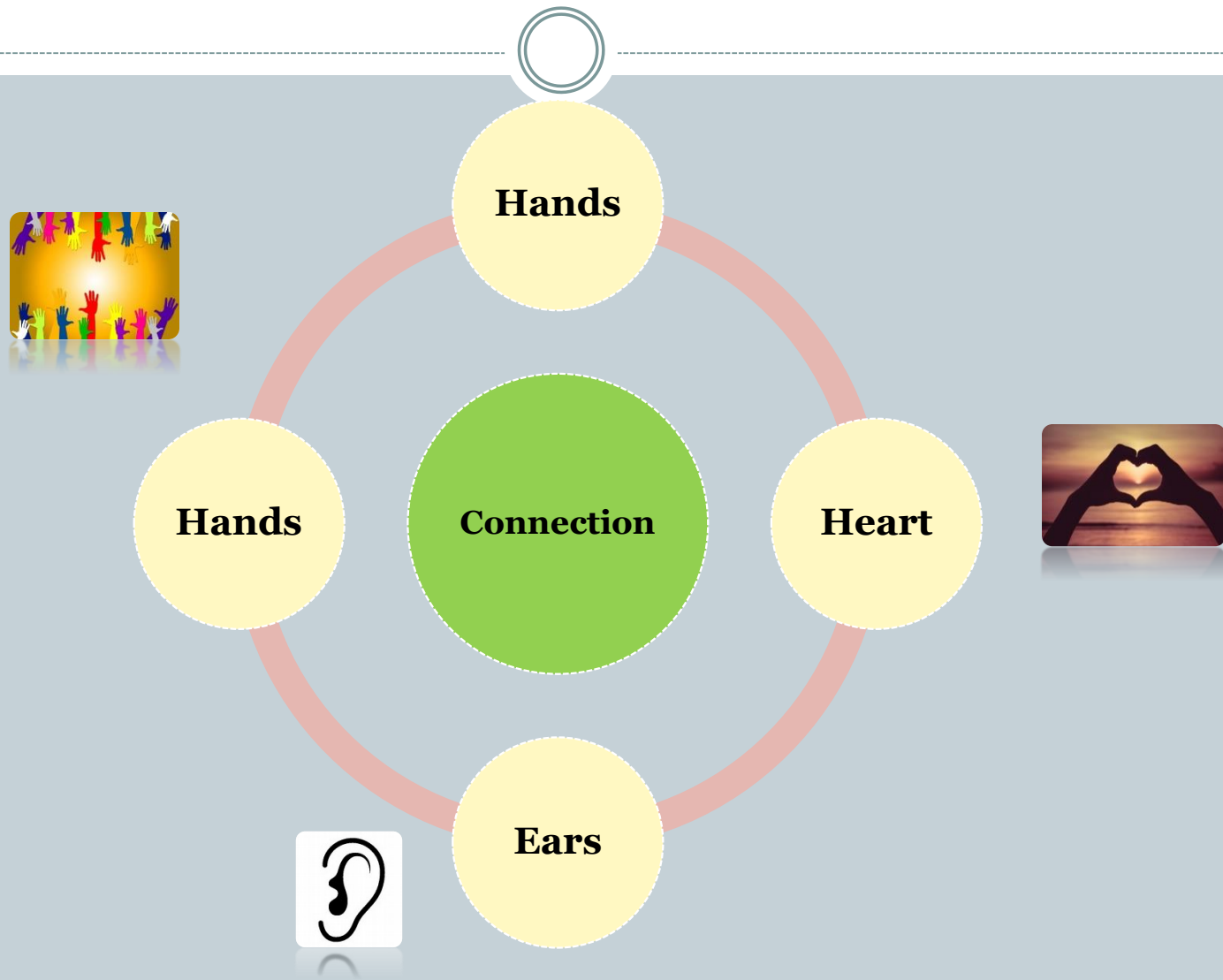
(Image source: Australian Childhood Foundation, 2011)

The Key Question (before we act):

What is my student's state of mind? What is my state of mind?

- **Social Engagement? We can talk!**
- **Fight/Flight? Need to deescalate or connect – carefully, often nonverbally.**
- **Freeze? Needs to “thaw”. Carefully engage use sensory experiences.**

Hands, Hear, Ears, Hand: Establishing Connection- Anxiety Antidotes...



Chronic Activation of the Stress Response



The Stress Response System is designed for short-term activation, but a lot of our children live with chronic toxic stress and anxiety, they are constantly “hyped” up:

- Scanning the environment: Is it safe? Checking/walking perimeter...
- Pre-emptive strikes: I will hurt you before you can hurt me, because I am for sure not going to get hurt by you. This applies to other students, teacher, etc.
- The world is not safe. I trust no-one, not even you.
- I am accustomed to hurt and danger and hence expect nothing from you. I will ask you for candy/stuff, though.
- You can't tell me that I am safe. I know better. I really do.

I am always on edge, afraid, looking out for danger...
This is where most of my energy goes.
There's not a lot of brainpower left for learning...

Activate the Senses!



Smell the Soup

Ask your students to image a large bowl of their favorite soup right in front of them.

- Now demonstrate how to smell the soup, slowly.
- Then blow on the soup, slowly.
- Repeat several times.

The key here is to breathe out longer than you breathe in and to do all of this slowly.

Skills practiced:

- Mindful breathing
- Imagination
- Attention to the body.



What could possibly go wrong?



Our most common mistake as adults is this:

We think we can “talk” to the child, when the child is in a state of neuroception of danger.

What is neuroception?

It is not a thought. It is knowing, instantly and unconsciously if the environment is safe through all of our senses.

If you assume that there is constant danger, you constantly expect and perceive danger.

Everything triggers a neuroception of danger.

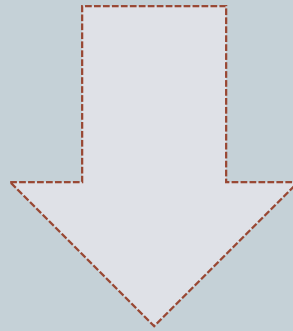


Knowing through our senses. Our knowing is always shaped by experience!

What could possibly go wrong? Triggering Neuroception of Danger



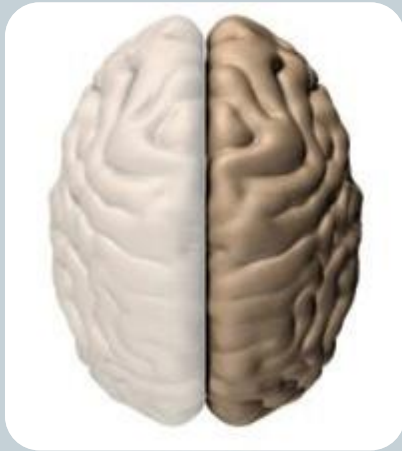
**We do not work with the child, but for the child
(in other words, not collaboratively).**



Resulting in **Neuroception of Danger!**

We mean well and try to help by imposing solutions we think might work, still, as they are not generated with the student, neuroception of danger continues.

Right Brain to Right Brain Communication



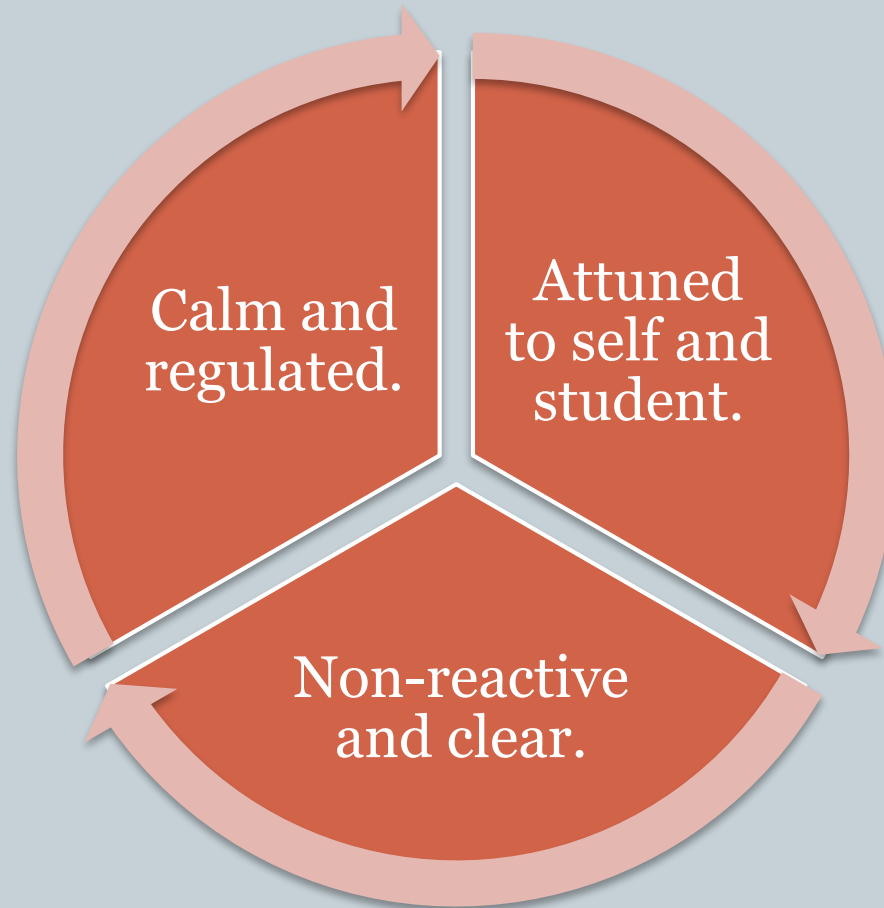
When we regulate our responses to our students' disorganized behaviors, our students sense (over time) that they can't get us off balance.

Misery wants company will not work: No matter how loud, aggressive, and disrespectful you are, I will not become loud, aggressive and disrespectful with you.

This is not something we say (when there is neuroception of danger the student will not be able to take this in). This is something we do, consistently, over time.

Beware of the **emotional reactivity trap**: Students can sense when we become off balance and will try to get us more off balance. When this happens, try to “tap out” if this is possible.

How we are: Co-regulation in Action



Now able to
co-regulate!
Right brain
to right
brain.
Not
language
based!

Getting to Language: CPS One Liner: What's up?



Curiously and with all the empathy you can muster ask:

- What's up? The listen, really listen.
- Assume the student wants to be heard.
- Assume that there is a real unsolved problem.

All behavior is communication. We all want to be heard and generally get disgruntled if people don't listen.

Children who grow up anxious often lack language skills to express what the problem is. So we are also teaching emotional communication!

Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS)



CPS begins with empathic listening and a commitment to find out what the actual problem is (as the student sees it and others see it).

Collaborative Problem Solving can only happen when both parties can think, in other words the Social Engagement System is on (activation of CNS, but not for danger).

Collaborative Problem Solving is a defined process. Much of the information on how to do this can be found on Ross Green's website for free: Including the Assessment of Lagging Skills and Unsolved Problems (ALSUP).

CPS insists that we use child language when naming the problem, not our adult and often "inaccurate language" such as: Child has problems completing undesired tasks.

The Antidote: Creating Joy!



You can create joy even with a traumatized and stressed-out student! Joy activates the social engagement system. Joy is shared.

But how?

Example:

- Itsy Bitsy Spider – for younger children. Walk fingers toward each other, but don't touch. Make eye contact.
- Dance like an elephant.

But isn't this just play? Yes, but this kind of joyful play creates the neurobiological changes that enable you to then talk with the child!



Creating Joy: Teens



Teens are tricky, but they are capable of joy.

- Ask for a story, perhaps the most beautiful memory they have of _____.
- Pay attention to affect while your student tells the story.
- “Catch” the moment where joy show up on the face.
- Make the moment bigger.
- Celebrate it!

What if my student has no joyful stories?

- Use guided imagery.
- Dance! You will almost certainly laugh.
- Help the student help someone else.
- Create relational joy right there and then.
- Therapy dog!

Interventions 3



Letting the Train Pass

Ask your students to think of their anxiety/anger/rage as a train coming towards them. They can see it coming. When it is right in front of them, it is all they can see, loud and bright. It is an overwhelming experience.

But the train moves on, it passes. We finally see it from a distance.

Tell this story in a colorful way.

Skills Practiced:

- Listening.
- De-fusion from intense feelings.
- Letting go.

Ask your students: What is the “train” in your life? What “sits in front of you” and won’t go away? What is overwhelming? How do you deal with whatever it is?

What about Crisis? Discipline? Rules...



Yes, you can and should have rules for your classroom. Keep it simple.

Discipline starts when the crisis is over: Remember: Logic is “off” when your student is in crisis.

- Re-establish or establish relationship.
- Truly identify the problem that led to the crisis.
- Skills are taught in the process of identifying the problem. You are modeling how to solve problems. How you are is your most important skill building tool!
- Validate students feelings, this does not mean the student is always “right” or the student was justified in his/her behavior.
- Understand that many students (especially those with trauma) have never had any meaningful discipline!

When all is lost...(seemingly)



When your student cannot think (fight/flight/ or freeze response).

Use a calm voice: What you say is less important than how you say it.

Provide comfort items (you may have to slide them over to the student).

Remember:

Your student cannot build the bridge right now. You are the builder.

Be there. Co-regulate. Be close, but not too close.

Offer a safer space to get to.

Use sensory experiences you know your student likes/needs/wants.