



Teaching Trauma in the Classroom

By: Heather T. Forbes, LCSW

Children are vulnerable. In an optimal environment, they are not expected to experience this vulnerability until later in life when their minds and nervous systems are equipped to handle elevated levels of fear, stress, and overwhelm. Yet, the key phrase here is “optimal environment.” Unfortunately, we live in the “real” world, so children will often find themselves in situations that are far from the optimal and the result can be childhood trauma.

Childhood trauma happens at both the emotional and psychological level and it can have a negative impact on the child’s developmental process. During a traumatic event (abuse, neglect, adoption, accidents, birth trauma, etc.), the lifelong impact is even greater if the child believes he powerless, helpless, and hopeless. When a child experiences one or all of these feelings, he begins to believe the world is dangerous. Repeated experiences of these feelings will create a lasting imprint from which he operates and behaves. A framework based in fear and survival becomes the child’s viewpoint of the world around him.

These early life experiences then influence the child’s ability to “behave,” or more correctly expressed, the child’s ability to stay “regulated.” Trauma impacts a child’s ability to stay calm, balanced, and oriented. Instead, children with traumatic histories often find themselves in a “dysregulated” state, which manifests into a child who does not behave, cannot focus, and/or lacks motivation. It is not a matter of choice or a matter of “good” child verses “bad” child; it is simply an imprint from the child’s past history. It’s the child’s new normal.

When working with children like this in the classroom, the most effective way to work with them is to work at the level of regulation, relationship, and emotional safety instead of at the level of behavior. These children’s issues are not behavioral; they are regulatory. Working at the level of regulation, relationship, and emotional safety addresses more deeply critical forces within these children that go far beyond the exchanges of language, choices, stars, and sticker charts.

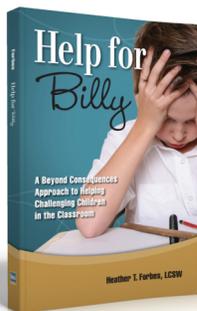
Traditional disciplinary techniques focus on altering the left hemisphere through language, logic, and cognitive thinking. These approaches are ineffective because the regulatory system is altered more effectively through a different part of the brain known as the limbic system. The limbic system operates at the emotional level, not at the logical level. Therefore, we must work to regulate these children at the level of the limbic system, which happens most easily through the context of human connection.

When the teacher says to a non-traumatized child, “Andy, can you please settle down and quietly have a seat?” Andy has the internal regulatory ability to respond appropriately to his teacher because trauma has not interrupted his developmental maturation of developing self-regulation tools and feeling like he is safe in the world. However, when Billy (the traumatized child) is asked the same question, his response is much different. He takes the long way around the classroom to his seat, he continues to not only talk but projects his voice across the room as if he is still out in the playground, and once seated continues to squirm and wiggle.

Traditionally, we have interpreted Billy as a disruptive child, pasted the label ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) onto him, and reprimanded him for his “naughty” behavior. What we have failed to see is that Billy *cannot* settle down on his own. His internal system has not experienced the appropriate patterning to know how to be well behaved like his classmate Andy and Billy does not know he is safe in this world, even if he is now in a safe environment.

The brain-body system is a pattern-matching machine. A child with little internal self-control will pattern himself according to his past external experiences. If his past experiences have been chaotic, disruptive, and overwhelming (trauma), he will continue acting this way until new patterns are established. Thus, a child coming into a calm and safe classroom is still likely to be acting as if he is in his previous chaotic and unsafe environment. A child can be taken out of trauma but not so easily can the trauma be taken out of the child. Past patterns of chaos are now the current framework for navigating his world; he knows no different.

The most effective way to change these patterns comes through safe, nurturing, attuned, and strong human connection. For the student in the classroom, it comes through the teacher-student relationship. The reality is, for our children impacted by trauma to learn and achieve academically, science is showing that they must be engaged at the relational level prior to any academic learning.



To read more on this topic, check out Heather’s book, *Help for Billy*, at <http://store.beyondconsequences.com/help-for-billy/>

To find out more about the Beyond Consequences parenting approach or to purchase a copy of one of this author’s book, please visit www.beyondconsequences.com



Heather T. Forbes, LCSW, is the owner of the Beyond Consequences Institute and author of numerous books on the topic of working with children impacted by trauma. Coming from a family of educators, Forbes has a passion for helping children in the classroom. Trauma robs children of their curiosity and her passion is to help these students return back to their innate love for learning. She consults and lectures extensively with both general and special education schools around the nation. Her signature style is to bridge the gap between academic research and "when the rubber hits the road" classroom situations, giving teachers and school personnel the understanding and tools they need for even the most challenging of students. Forbes has worked in schools with trauma-impacted students and knows first hand how challenging it can be on a day-in and day-out basis with these students. Additionally, much of her insight on understanding trauma, disruptive behaviors, and developmental delays, also comes from her own experience of raising two internationally adopted children and mentoring a severely trauma-impacted young adult.

Books by Forbes:

1. *The Trauma-Informed School: A Step-by-Step Implementation Guide for Administrators and School Personnel* (co-authored with Jim Sporleder)
2. *Help for Billy: A Beyond Consequences Approach for Helping Challenging Children in the Classroom*
3. *A Study Guide for Help for Billy: A Chapter-By-Chapter Workbook for Teachers* (co-authored with Jim Sporleder)
4. *The Trauma-Informed Curriculum for Social-Emotional Learning: Preschool Through Early Elementary* (co-authored with Kara Rogers, LICSW)
5. *Beyond Consequences, Logic, and Control: A Love Based Approach to Helping Children With Severe Behaviors, Volume 1* (English, Spanish, and Russian versions)
6. *Beyond Consequences, Logic, and Control: A Love Based Approach to Helping Children With Severe Behaviors, Volume 2*
7. *Dare to Love: The Art of Merging Science and Love Into Parenting Children with Difficult Behaviors*
8. *100 Daily Parenting Reflections*

