

Introduction

Dean Shareski

We are so excited to bring you this learning opportunity on, What do I do? Trauma Sensitive Strategies For Challenging Behaviors. We are all coming together from all corners of British Columbia and I happened to be coming to you from Saskatchewan. I'd like to acknowledge the treaty for territory where the home of the Cree, the Sota, Dakota, Lakota, Nakota, and the home of the Metis Nation for welcoming me and allowing me to live, work and play on their traditional territory. I just invite all of you to consider for a moment, the traditional lands, where you live, work, and play. Think about the gratitude that you would have towards being able to call that your home.

We are excited today about this conversation with Sarah Brooks, Perveen Engineer, Fiona James and Regan Rankin, all who have a ton of experience and some great insights on handling these very common and yet really concerning issues that I know we're here to explore together and just build up our own capacity to learn with them.

To start off, we would like to introduce you to Lily. Lily is a kindergarten student who has been having difficulty adjusting to her new classroom. Her daycare reported no concerns about her transitioning to kindergarten. She is very bright – able to read sight words and familiar words with no problem. When she is engaged in a hands-on learning activity, she generally does quite well.

During carpet time, she often interrupts, shouts at or hits others or gets up and runs out of the room and around the school shouting and giggling loudly. When the teacher and EA try to get her to come back into the room, she either appears to not listen and continues running or kicks and hits and yells, “I hate you!” This same behavior is often noted when the teacher and EA are busy helping other students during desk work. During snack and lunch times, she often refuses to eat anything, creating more of a problem in the afternoons. The teacher is at her wit's end!

What's happening in the brain?

Dean Shareski

All of us probably know a Lily have had a Lily in our classrooms and our experience. She represents a scenario that maybe we've come across in some way, shape or form. And you can maybe change the details to make it fit a specific experience you're thinking of. But we want to dive into this scenario for the for a bulk of our time together and really unpack what's happening and how we might solve that one. I'm going to start with Sarah Brooks. Sarah, I guess when we see something this, the first thing we might want to ask ourselves is, what is actually happening in Lily's brain.

Sarah Brooks

Thanks, Dean. Hi everyone. My name is Sarah Brooks. I'm a Learning Assistance Resource Teacher coming to you from the traditional territory of the Kwakwaka'wakw speaking people in North Vancouver Island. Taking a look at the brain, there are three main parts of the brain. There's the neocortex, which is the part of the brain where thinking comes from. We learn at this part, it's responsible for problem solving and creative thinking and our imagination. The second section is the limbic system, and this part of the brain is responsible for our emotional and behavioral responses. And finally, the reptilian part of the brain, which is responsible for all of our vital organs, all of those things that we do without even thinking about them, our hearts beating, our breathing, all of those important functions that our brains just don't need to think about.

When life is going smoothly for us, all three of these are in great communication. Our neocortex is a fully engaged and we're able to function as we normally would. But what happens as in the case of Lily, when an alarm or a threat is perceived in our brain? Probably the best way to describe it would be to use Dr. Siegel's hand model. If I show you my hand here, we can say that this top part here would be the neocortex and hiding underneath, is our limbic system and our reptilian brain. When we're in control, everything is good and functioning normally, but when a threat is perceived, our neocortex goes offline as though we flipped our lid and our reptilian brain and limbic system takeover.

The reptilian part of our brain shuts down all of those things that we aren't going to need for basic survival. So our blood flow to our limbs and our extremities slows down, we don't get digestion, that stops completely when we are in the fight or flight state of mind, Adrenaline and cortisol flood our bodies and our behaviors and emotions take over. As we see in Lily's case, every time she comes to the carpet or in this situation, when she comes to the carpet, her alarm is triggered and she starts to react vocally, physically, and ultimately running away from her situation, which none of that were happening when her neocortex was engaged.

Why is it happening?

Dean Shareski

Sarah, I guess a question that I was thinking about is, for students who have chronic or repeated behaviors, how important is it to review those? Or can we just rely on our past experience, because I'm guessing if you have a Lily, as the scenario shows, this is not the first time this has happened. Do I just rely on that or is there something else I should do in terms of reviewing those triggers?

Sarah Brooks

That's a great question, Dean. Actually, it's a very difficult question to answer. Taking a look at past episodes or past escalations is very important. But in order to figure that out, we need to put on an investigator's hat and really take a look at what's going on behind the scenes for this lovely girl. Many people have heard of functional behavior assessments, where you look at the antecedent, what's happened just before the behavior, taking a look at the behavior and the consequence, what she's getting from the behavior, not really the consequences and the terms that we think about it, the punishment that she receives. Oftentimes, that can be helpful. All that information is very great information, but we need to look deeper than that. Dr. Stuart Shanker describes five domains that everybody has stressors in.

The first domain is the physical or biological domain, and this is what's happening within your body. If we look at Lily, we can ask questions, like, is she tired? Did she have enough to eat? Maybe it's getting close to lunchtime or snack time. Does she have any sensory issues? Is her body comfortable on the carpet? Is that space okay for her? When we look at the next domain, the emotional domain, this includes all of our feelings and internal excitement. How are we feeling? Are we frustrated? Did something make us anxious? Are we sad? All of those types of things can play into our behaviors. Next is a social domain. And in the social domain, we look at conflicts between peers. We look at the feeling of acceptance. We take a look at all of those interactions with others in our surroundings.

Is there a sense of loneliness? Does she feel left out as she's moving to that carpet? The cognitive domain is all of those things that pressures coming from inside ourselves as well, from our brain. For myself, it's a lot of negative self-talk that causes me a lot of issues. For other people it's anxiety, maybe it's time constraints. I can tell you this webinar and thinking about it all afternoon has caused my brain

to flip its lid just a tiny bit. Thankfully it's still engaged enough that I can talk and not lose all of my words. But the final one is the pro-social domain. This is looking at, waiting your turn, being late and other people's stress. One of our biggest stressors is the stress of the people around us and our brains have a kind of Bluetooth with each other.

Sounds kind of interesting. But if you think about our caveman ancestors, if I perceived a danger and my family is just off to the side, I may not have time to tell them, that oh my goodness, there's a tiger over there. Our brains are actually wired when threat is perceived by myself, those in my close proximity are going to feel that through this kind of Bluetooth. And so when we're sitting in a classroom, if we have a student who's perceived a threat, then all of the people around them also become a little bit more heightened to that possible threat. Which is really important to think about for teachers, because in the midst of that episode, that escalation from Lily, how is my body feeling? Can you feel your own stress rising? Are you going to flip your lid and react in a behavioral response as opposed to a common nurturing response?

The Three R's (Regulate, Relate, Reason)

Dean Shareski

As we know, and we know about the brain, we're just at the very start of understanding it, but I think that sets us up to at least have a bit better understanding of what's going on with Lily. But of course our next question is going to be, okay, we have an understanding, maybe what's going on, but we need to get her calmed down. I'm going to pass this over to Regan to address this idea of what's our next play here to help Lily calm down.

Regan Rankin

Hi. My name is Regan Rankin, and I am currently a learning support teacher on beautiful unceded territory of the Tsleil-Waututh in Squamish, in North Vancouver. I have also spent a lot of time, previous to this job, teaching in the district program for behavior and mental health. That program was put on hold with all this stuff with COVID going on in the world, but I have made a very healthy career off Lily's and working to help regulate and really try to figure out why foundational belief is around behavior is communication. Taking what Sarah was saying and really trying to figure out what is going on.

When you're working with a student that is in a heightened state, especially when they're out and running around now, like Lily and they've completely flipped their lid. Something that is really helpful to keep in mind are the three Rs, which is regulate, relate and reason. When I'm talking about regulating, you're really just focusing on calming the brain and creating that sense of safety for the students. I often get questions from colleagues like, well, now you're sitting in the hallway and you're watching a cat video, isn't that rewarding the behavior? It's a delicate balance. In order to get the student back and in a regulated state, you do have to find some strategies that work for that student.

This would all come out of looking at those functional behavior assessments, looking at behavior planning, to try to figure out what may or may not work. This is actually, Lily is a scenario that I am personally quite familiar with. What works for this student is a few things that we're going to get into next. Relationship is so, so key, and building the relationship with students and not just actually the students, but also with their families or caregivers and with their support network is huge. Because we were able to create a relationship with the family in Lily's scenario, we came to realize that the reason that the daycare or preschool didn't report any challenging issues was because something happened between preschool and kindergarten, that changed everything.

What we realized about Lily, was that she had lost her mother, and in fact she'd watched her mother die of an overdose. That was a massive traumatic event for her. Having that relationship and that communication with the foster parent, helped to guide our practice and knowing more about this student. Then the important thing becomes building the relationship with that student. Getting to know what they're interested in, guiding things like that, to help come up with strategies and support things. Gordon Neufeld has a really lovely quote that I like, which is "Kids learn best when they feel like their teacher likes them, and that they like their teacher." Some of these kiddos, it's so hard, especially with the challenging behavior, they often will put up walls and become very unlikable.

They become very offensive. They can become very challenging. I talk to people and I'm like, okay, so, every kid, you have to find something interesting, exciting about them. Something that they're interested in, that you can capture and relate to. I've had students where literally, every kid has two eyebrows, and lots of hairs within those eyebrows, that's at least 200 things you can like about them in a year, right? Sometimes that is all that you've got, but hang onto those eyebrows. Right. Because you've got to find something to connect with about these students. For example, when we think about regulating with Lily, starting things like soft starts and watching. She happens to be a Disney fanatic. What we've started doing, are things like watching Frozen karaoke videos, first thing in the morning, and that singing actually helps physically regulate your body.

She can read actually; she came into kindergarten with the ability to read. She is likely bored at circle time, we know that. But having a soft start based on something that we know that she likes, pulls her in, it's something predictable that she knows and we can calm that down. But in the moment of really heightened-ness, if we pull up a little video of Olaf singing or some Disney movie, you can see the energy calm down with her. Of course, if you're working with a high school student, I saw some of you guys are working with grade seven, grade 12, obviously you likely wouldn't pull up a Frozen video, but you might pull up a skateboard video or you might connect with them on some different levels.

Building Relationships

Regan Rankin

Sometimes in that moment, when you're trying to regulate them, you really want to engage their prefrontal cortex. Asking them weird questions or asking them sort of, hey, what's your favorite Disney princess? Mine's definitely Rapunzel. Oh gosh, I couldn't imagine having her hair. Instantly it's something in the moment that's super weird. My biggest asset is being able to out weird the kids I work with, because all of a sudden they're like, wait, what? I was freaking out and running around the hall, why are you asking me about Disney princesses? But it's just that as soon as they start thinking, you can see that start coming back down. And even if it's halfway back down, then you really want to work on that relating. This is where you get into the active listening part.

You're trying to figure out what's going on and you want to hear them and they need to feel heard. You can tell when they're coming back down, they've stopped running, they've stopped kicking, they've stopped yelling, they're getting a little bit calmer. Sometimes I just let that stuff go. Sometimes they have to run and kick and do these things. Of course not kicking us. But if they're just throwing things and kicking the wall, sometimes you just have to let that go in order to get to the relating. Validating their feelings, just saying, I'm so sorry, this is really hard. This looks really hard for you. Intentionally committing to positive language is very helpful in the relating part of working through the three Rs.

Instead of going out into the hallway and saying, okay, you need to calm down. You need to stop yelling. This is not okay. Instead of approaching a situation like that, I will often calmly walk up to the student say, wow, you look really upset. How can I help? Can I help you right now? They might say, "Ah, you're so stupid. I hate you." I'm sorry. You sound really angry. Just maintaining that calm and that focus, which can be really hard in the moment, will help to regulate the student as well. Sometimes students actually almost, I think, are looking sometimes for a reaction, swearing at us or yelling at us. I've had a kid, "You're such an effing B." I'll say, you know what, wow, you sound very angry, right?

I think they're hoping that I say, oh my gosh, you swore, this is not okay, but by just responding in an unexpected way, can actually really help. And then the active listening part is something that you're not agreeing with the student, you are literally repeating back what you've heard. "I hate you so much. You won't let me go out to the playground and I hate you." You hate me because I won't let you go out to the playground. Is that what you're telling me? "Yes." Okay. So how can I help? Right? It's not time for the playground. How can I help? But just repeating back, it's not necessarily agreeing with them, but they're feeling heard and validated.

In that moment, you're continuing to build that relationship and that trust. The third R is the reason. Reasoning. Sometimes, this is actually when you get to the actual problem solving. Getting to the problem solving can be a challenge, but if it's possible to get there, it's very helpful. Sometimes this doesn't happen for two or three days and that's okay. Sometimes it actually just doesn't happen. And sometimes we need to just let some of these things go, because revisiting it can reintroduce the flipped brain again. It can be a bit of a balance, but reinforcing the limits, going through contingency maps. What happened? What was the problem? What did I do about it? What could I do differently? Can be very helpful, especially visuals.

But also it's okay to talk about the behavior, you need to separate the behavior from the student. So, wow, that was a really hard day. I'm sorry that your behavior got so out of control. It was really telling me that you were very upset about X, so you're not a bad kid, the behavior is not great. That's what we need to focus on changing. And so my last slide that I want to talk about, is just, when we're working with students that become dysregulated or have a really hard time managing their behaviors, this is a graphic that a friend of ours, Kristin Wiens, she does incredible graphics, and actually I think her information will be in our resources.

She comes up with all these fun graphics that I like to print off and have, but also share with colleagues. When we're looking at power, often times kids really struggle with feeling not powerful or that they have no choice or that things are often just done to them. It's really important for us to regulate and figure out, what power we can give and when, and why we might be holding on to something. I think that's an important thing for us to think about as well. Why is something important to us and is it the hill to die on at the moment? For example, offering choices is a huge strategy that you can use to help regulate students, right?

Things like, you want to do an art project, that's the goal. You might say, would you like the green paper or the red paper? I want the orange paper. Okay, excellent. Thank you for making a choice. I've given up power in that moment, because it's about the art project. It's not really about the green or the red. They choose orange. Great. If I were to hunker down and be like, green or red, I said green or red, that might cause an escalation. They feel they've lost power.

Now, if it is something that desperately needs green or red, I don't know even what that would be. Okay. Then you have to think about what your end game is. Sometimes we have to think big picture and what we're actually trying to accomplish, and I'm not caring that they're doing their work in pen versus pencil, if that's going to get the work done. Looking for some of these ways to give power and show the power with, not the power over, can be very helpful, but you have to have a very solid relationship with the students that you're working with. And again, feel like you're on their side, that they are important, that they matter and that their information matters.

Creating a Safe Space

Dean Shareski

I had flashbacks to my early days of teaching, as well as my early days of parenting. When I could have used this advice back then, and I did let things, I couldn't separate behavior from child. I got sucked into the emotion of it, because these are high volatile experiences. It's easy, even as adults when we partly should know better. But also this is just so rich in terms of providing very specific perspectives on how we might help a child come out of this. I appreciate that Regan, those were all excellent. I know that there are even more practical strategies that we can deploy for maybe our whole class. Many of them would be preventive, I would think as well. And so I'm going to invite Fiona to just share some of her strategies, things, ideas and ways that we might be in a better position to help all children in these various scenarios.

Fiona James

Thanks, Dean. My name is Fiona James, and I am lucky to work here on the Sunshine Coast on the traditional and unceded territory of Shishalh Nation. There are so many strategies out there and as Regan and Sarah, both pointed out, some of the main things are, building that compassion and that relationships and thinking about Lily and what she is going through and all the different things. On this slide here, it says, how can I create a trauma informed classroom? On the poster, it's really about having that compassion and that caring and that understanding. On here, they have five main things that are key. Most classroom teachers do it, but I think it's looking at a little bit deeper to help guide you. The one thing you don't want to do, and there's only one don't on here, is punishing a student for a behavior that's trauma related.

Often we tend to get caught up into that. The main thing is creating a safe place. I think in the example of Lily, is what Regan was saying, is that that's what they did. They knew that giving her a soft landing that's predictable every day, was critical. Whether or not she came at nine o'clock or 10 o'clock or in the afternoon, she knew that that soft landing would be there to help ground and regulate her. That's often key that we need with students, is how do we provide that? I see it very often in classrooms where there might be grounding boxes, or there might be little STEM activities that teachers have across the board. I've seen it in high schools where there might be a question on the board and it's the same thing every day. So it's nice and calm and quiet when the student enters the room.

This is a great infographic and you can find it from Echo and they have lots of different ones on there as well. This is another tool that can be used and a strategy when students are nice and calm, their lids aren't flipped like Sarah said, they're in that calm zone, but you're trying to work on preventative strategies. And when you've built up that relationship with a student, you can do this with them. And so this is something that the Kelty Institute has put out, Kelty Mental Health, and it can be used for kids and adolescents. It's very user-friendly and has a list of different... What does it feel like when you might be in a heightened or flip state for the child, and then what are some strategies that you can use? And then

it goes on and it actually builds a little safety plan with the student. How do they keep themselves safe? It's an excellent resource.

Mindfulness

Fiona James

The other thing to be aware of, is that power of the pause and the mindfulness for students. There's lots of different things out there. Many people have been practicing mindfulness, and it's just something that sometimes we just, even ourselves, especially right now, is being aware of that, and what are some things out there. Some things that I like, there's mindfulness activity cards, and that'll be listed on the resource list. And it's a great, there's 50 little cards in there. Some of the things is how to start your day. And some of the cards are, they're really fun and interactive that you can do with students and that creates that mindfulness and that relationships and the connections and the compassion, and it gives the students tools that they can use for when they're calm.

There's also some great websites on mindfulness as well. Another strategy is using storybooks in your classroom. There's ones called, Breathe Like a Bear or Yoga Pretzels. The next thing is, that relates to what Sarah talked about is a book called, The Animals in My Brain, by Sarah Joseph. I am lucky that Sarah actually works and lives on the Sunshine Coast. And the illustrator is from the Sunshine Coast as well. And so she took basically Dan Siegel's, the five parts and using the brain in the Palm of your hand and explains it in really user-friendly, kid-friendly. I think he can stand it all the way up. It helps guide parents as well, if you need a parenting resource. On her website, she has an excellent free activity and discussion guide that you can use as well.

And so it's a wonderful resource. There are many more out there. The Asante Centre has, and that's a local resource too, has reframe and reconsider the behavior and those strategies as well. And in the first webinar Dr. Linda O'Neil has some great strategies. And if you look on their resource list has some excellent ones too.

Dean Shareski

Thank you for that. Just another great reminder that, that first webinar is a broader SEL conversation and dovetails quite nicely into our conversation today. I would recommend that you have a peak at it as well. Fiona, you mentioned that, at the beginning, you talked about a trauma informed classroom, but I've also heard the term trauma sensitive practice. I wonder if those are one in the same or if they're different, how do we understand how those two terms work?

Fiona James

You often hear them interrelated. I like trauma sensitive. I prefer that term myself. I think when you hear the term trauma informed, you think, hey, was there something I need to learn, or I need to be aware of, do I need to go take some professional development on? I don't think you do. That's why I like trauma sensitive, is because it's telling you about having a compassionate approach. There's nothing that you need to be aware of. It's just being aware of being compassionate and caring and making those connections and building on those relationships.

Having a Plan

Dean Shareski

Thank you. Now, as I've heard us work towards those, my guess is that our participants and the audience, once again, I'll invite you to think of the questions, but some of the questions might involve the fact that, well, I have a particular student who might not fit this path that we've gone, a Lily, like that. He or she's an outlier and I don't know what to do with that. I think, not that we're going to have quite the same approach with those, but I think we have to acknowledge the fact that we have children who have a very, very complex situations that might not be, fit into what our conversation thus far. I'm going to invite Perveen to come in and just talk a little bit about, what do we do when we have outliers that listen?

I understand these strategies. I implement them. They sometimes work. They work for most kids, but I've got this one kid and then none of this works for it. What do I do at this point? I just quit. Right? That's my move. I just decide to hand in my paper and quit, or is there some other approach or attitude we could take? Perveen, there's a hard question for you to deal with, but I know you can handle it.

Perveen Engineer

I hope so. Thank you, Dean, for the introduction. My name is Perveen Engineer. I'm actually honored to work, play and live on the unceded territory of the Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh at Squamish nations. That Dean is not an easy question, or an easy answer actually. Sometimes there is no answer. I want you guys, I would like to say to you, be easy on yourself, be gentle and kind, there are things we don't understand. There's the outlying behavior, the big behaviors, the explosions, things like, where is this coming from? What do we do? Sometimes we don't have the answers and that's okay. But what's really important here is, and I'll get into the part about the trauma informed practice and how it relates to the story I'm going to share with you in a bit.

But what is important is to be kind to yourself, to work in a team approach and to look at the behavior and ask yourself, why is this happening? What can I do? What is the plan? Is there a plan? I'll be honest, I'm not a teacher, I'm a youth and family worker. A lot of my background is just behavior, behavior, behavior, behavior. It's a lot of collaborative problem solving. I will talk a little bit about Ross Greene student collaborative problem solving with our outliers, but also collaborative problem solving as a team. And what does that look like? You see certain behaviors and please know that it's okay sometimes to stand back and go, I have no clue. I have no idea. I need support. I need help. Is that coming from a mental health, as Fiona talked about, like the Kelty clinic, are we looking as Regan talked about, we're looking at functional behavior assessments, we're looking at positive behavior support plans. I know that's what we use in my district, and we use the de-escalation, escalation continuum. The good thing about the plan, and that was the very first question I always have. What is the plan? Who's aware of the plan, and who's a part of the plan, because your team approach is so key here. And when I look at the plan, sometimes the plan doesn't match the behavior. There's an internal dialogue going on with me, okay, we're missing something.

We got to look at this, we got to figure it out. But if there is a written plan and people are aware of that plan, at least we have a starting off point, because what happens, when you sit down as a team and you take a team approach to those behaviors, that you have no clue what to do, and you're tapping into your external resources as well as to your internal resources. External to family, ICM meetings with the ministry. In Vancouver, I'm lucky because we have children's in Sunny Hill, very close to us. So we can connect easily. I work on the downtown East side. So I have a clinic called the Richard clinic, so I can call

up the nurse practitioner and say, have you helped this family? Not help this family? Have you helped with this child?

That is showing big behaviors, which I know are due to trauma, because in my communities are intergenerational trauma and the school sometimes is the trigger. That's what I recognize, is the institution that can be the trigger for these kids. And it's intergenerational, something I have little or no control over. I need to figure out how do I make this person feel safe? That's a part of the plan and that's a team approach. And that's why if you can sit down as a team and really hash it out, that plan is key. And then I have quite a few refugees. They're coming with trauma from other countries, seeing things that most of us have never experienced.

But what I see are the behaviors around it. I see the hypo or the person shuts down, or the hyper works really explosive. And the hypo, like, when you have the child who shut down and just crying and sitting there, is just as for me as a staff member, I find that trauma is just hard to deal with the student who redecorate a room. I use the term redecorate when things are flying and going. First thing is to clear your audience, because we're taking that away. But it's really important that those kids have that connection, whether it's hypo or hyper and how do I help them, that child that's shut down?

It's the plan, it's the team. For this one child, it was another student in the classroom that was the trigger, that reminded them of somebody in the camp, from the country she came from as a refugee. That is something I have no control. Here comes the trauma informed practice piece. That relationship that I have with her or that student based on their emotion, I see you're upset, like Regan said, using those statements. I see you're upset finding a safe place. Fiona talked about safe places, where can we go? It's about, how is that brain triggered, like Sarah talked about, the amygdala flipping, flipping your lid, and then you activated your amygdala. How do I start connecting to that frontal cortex and start working with the student?

First is relationship, and relationship comes from authenticity. Authenticity is really my authenticity as a human being. I don't give the students somebody they want. I give the student to me. We may have differing views on music or whatever it is, but they're getting me, and they're getting somebody who genuinely cares. So when we look at that trauma approach, am I also building predictability and consistency for the student? The routine in which we have within our classroom is predictable and mostly consistent. And as a lot of us know, our students with dysregulation who have a hard time with transitions are big. Whether our students come from a trauma background or not. Right?

Usually transitions can be quite difficult for students. So that predictability and consistency and community and connection. What is that community? Who are they connected to? Is it just me, because I am not doing that person a favor if I'm not connecting them to their peers. This is why plans are so important. I understand for educators, the difficulty in the day-to-day working mechanisms of, you have a curriculum to get through, you have a pandemic to deal with, and how do you do it? Hopefully there's somebody who leads, but always recognizing that when we're dealing with somebody who is in trauma, the plan is held by a person who understands that trauma and is helping everybody within the team function.

The community, outside agencies, the consistency, how consistent are those community involvement happening? Do they have connection with their peers? And finally, is safety. Safety is key, because safety is everything we do, right? Right now, nothing is more important than our PPE, and making sure our students are safe and we are safe, right? In trauma informed approach, safety is that person that

that person can go to. I always say, who's your people? Who's the people the students connected to? Is that on a safety plan?

An Example

Perveen Engineer

I worked with a student, I met him in grade three. And then I saw him again in grade seven, eight. What had happened is, he went through a what we call a program that was through Vancouver Coastal Health and the school board. It helps with the family and counseling and all that, and for the student. That wasn't so successful, and then the student ended up in what we have are classes that help kids more with SEL, because SEL in this situation is key, because we're co-regulating. But we're teaching them self-awareness and self-management. He was in this class with the big boy and him and I had a good relationship. I helped him transition back into the school. There was another student and the student turned to him and said, "I'm sorry."

And he goes, "What are you sorry for?" He goes, "I'm sorry. Your brain works that way." Well, my six foot 220 guy gets up and says, Perveen, move the bleep out of way, I'm going to kill. He was really upset. This is an outlier. This is a huge behavior. I knew what was coming. We had a plan, the YFW, which is youth and family worker, I said to them, I said, can you get the other student out of here? He took him to the safe place, and my student [inaudible]. He started banging and shaking the principal door. We're five minutes till the end of the school day. I have a job to do right now with the person on the other side of the door. I got to re-engage with the student, get them out and keep everybody safe or have a big explosion.

She was on the phone to the police, 911, because that's in the plan. I was on the phone to mom. I said, "Mom, I need you here now." He was going and there was no connection. He looked at me for a split second and I said, "Go, your mom is outside." He said, "I want my Lego. And I want his guitar." I said, ""You know what, I'll get you whatever you need. Just go." I have parents coming to pick up their kids. It's almost the end of the day. All I said to him that whole time, I said, "I am proud of you for making a good decision." That's all I said to him. His mom walks up to him. She goes, "Hey, boo."

He goes, "Start the car." All I could think of was IKEA. Right? But he went home. And so when Regan talks about, that was successful, the YFW, the principal and I, and the student that he was going after, we had a debrief after. The YFW asked him, "What were you trying to say to him?" He said, "I'm actually was wanting to say to him, I'm sorry, my brain used to work that way, but you can change, but it came out wrong." Here was a kid trying to help him, but was the trigger. And so my guy went away, in a debrief, we followed the plan, right? So there's relationship in there. There's consistency. There's predictability and there's safety. We brought safety to that whole school, but also to those two students. And I asked the student that I was working with.

I said, "Had you got to him, what would you have done?" He said, "I probably would have punched him." I said, "What else would you do?" He said, "I would've punched the YFW." I said, "Well, why?" He goes, "Because I just don't like the way that dresses." That was his thing. I said, "What stopped you?" He said, "Because you were going to call the police." Let's talk about his trauma here. I said, "Why is that?" He goes, "Because the last time they came to my house, there was a lot of them. And they were in uniform and it scared me." Right? It was [inaudible]. His trauma was the police.

It's interesting how we see again, how that is for some kids, he could not come back. He just could not come back from it. That debrief with his peer, the debrief with the other staff for him never happened, but a debrief is so key. Sometimes when we look at that trauma, we think about all those things. We think about the relationship, the predictability, the community and the safety. And then you ask yourself, is this plan working and do I need to change it? Is there a team approach? Yes or no? You're only as good as your team. Some things is that we don't want to personalize, because it's not about us. Sometimes we are the trigger, but we need to recognize that and change it and remove yourself. It's okay.

I talked about authenticity and connection with the student, how key that is, especially somebody when it's in trauma and routines and boundaries and know it's okay to happen. But most of all, be self-aware of yourself, know what your triggers are. If you find that sometimes things are difficult, make sure that you have people to back you up. It's really important. It's important to tap out and say, I can't do this at the moment. Your mental health is key. Looking at what your triggers are, also is very important.

Debriefs: Parveen and Regan

Dean Shareski

Thank you, Perveen., I have lots of questions and thoughts, and I'll pose this to you Perveen, but then I also want the other panelists to chime in a little bit. You talk about this idea of debrief. I think, it's one of those things that it sounds good on paper. I don't know that people actually do it the way they should. What would you say is the significance Perveen in your experience of the value of that debrief? Because it seems like, listen, we've already gone through the whole experience with the child and it's draining, we solved it. No one's getting hurt now. Can we just move on with our lives? What's what's the significance of that debrief?

Perveen Engineer

Thanks, Dean. I think there's, trauma is different for everybody. It can be one incident that can cause trauma and it can be numerous incidents, compounded incidents for people that have trauma. As for us in the education system, we have vicarious trauma. How much of us actually live those experiences that have happened within our classrooms and we haven't dealt with the emotions? Is one thing to deal with the behavior and the problems and the event, but the emotions are key. If we don't deal with our own emotions, our mental health is key here, and we're not good to anybody in that case. I think, in our business, it's hard to have those debriefs as long as we would like, but it's really key to our benefit, because we have not resolved what's happened.

I've been injured on the job, where I was away for two months and the debrief was very short because it was a very traumatic event, but it lives with us. People still ask me or talk about it. Sometimes you can never finish, but I think it's so important. I know we don't have the time, but it's so important to fix or find out why we have those emotions and where those emotions are coming from. And we can move on and have healthier relationships with our students and our colleagues

Dean Shareski

I hadn't thought about it in terms of unpacking, debriefing our emotions as adults in it. Because I usually think, okay, so how does this help the kid and impact the kid? But you've raised a really great point. Regan, what were you going to say around the ideas of debriefing?

Regan Rankin

I think it's super important. First to acknowledge our feelings and each other's feelings, because I too have been through some extremely traumatizing. It's really hard to see a student and especially, I've seen some really young, little ones that are clearly suffering so deeply. And so that's traumatizing for us and we can't underplay that. And so knowing in our districts and our professional realm who our support people are, do we need to seek counseling for ourselves? All of these things especially when you're working in, I was working in that program with mental health and challenging behavior, every day. It's exhausting. I'm not a robot because, you can't expect that you won't have some vicarious trauma through this. That is important.

But also what I was going to say is, it's also important then also to revisit the plan, did it work? Could it have been improved? When? What Perveen said, the more consistency you can provide, the better. For example, I have a student who really tests boundaries, likes to run away, lots of attention getting behavior. She took off and wanted to run. She was going to go; she was taking off. And I said, "Okay, okay." She said, "Well, what do you mean okay? I'm leaving. I'm going home." I was like, "I hear you. You're going home. You're angry." "Well, I'm going now." "Okay. We've established this." She went out the door and I just came to the door and I said, "So I'm not leaving this space."

It was a door to the outside. "I'm not leaving this space because I have other students I'm responsible for." That was my boundary. I said, "So, let me get this straight, your plan, run home, leave school property. Got it. My plan, staying here, just to let the next piece of my plan is that as soon as you go down that street and turn that corner, I have to call the police." She turns around and she goes, "You wouldn't do that. You're not going to." I said, "Oh, well, so here's the thing. Have I ever lied to you before?" She looked at me, and I said, "So if I say I'm going to give you something, I have. If I said, I'm going to take something away, I have. You trust me. You may not think so right now, but you can bet that as soon as you go down that street and turn the corner, I care so much about you that I absolutely will follow through. That's in our plan."

"Okay. Then I'm going to just sit here." "That's such a much better choice. I feel better about that. Thank you." So she sat down and it was cold outside. I was like, "Okay, well, so you're sitting there. That's your plan? Got the plans. We've ironed things out. Good. I'm going inside. It's cold." Two minutes later, she came in the door. She goes, "Well, I'm going to be on my phone, out in the hall." "Awesome. So now you're warm and you're closer. I feel much better about this." Well, I said, "Well, I'm going to look at what those guys are doing on the computer over here, because it looks cool." "Hey guys, do you want to see a video from my weekend?" In she comes, put her phone down. Reregulated right there.

But if you're sticking to the plan and they know the plan, they have the trusted relationship. She is a highly, highly dysregulated kid, probably one of the most dysregulated kids I've worked with. There was a lot of swearing in there as well. I was careful to censor myself. This sort of thing is really important. And in revisiting the plan, it's like, did that work? Yup. We got her back, everything was safe. Did she completely buy-in? Was she doing some naughty things? Was she swearing? Yes. All of those things. But if you follow the plan, if somebody were to come in and be like, I'm going to chase her down the street, it would have gone sideways in a hot minute. So having everybody know what the plan is and being on board with that is important.

Debriefs: Sarah

Dean Shareski

Sarah, let me ask you, number one, is debrief part of your practice? If so who's involved in that and just tell me how and why that happens for you or maybe it doesn't. I know that it may not happen for everybody, does that happen for you?

Sarah Brooks

Debriefing, I agree wholeheartedly that it is a very important piece of the puzzle for ourselves to work out what happened, where did we go wrong? Did we follow the plan? All of those things. But as one of the attendees, I think her name was Julie mentioned, that it doesn't happen in all districts. I can relate to that. It doesn't happen in my district all the time either. And so the way that we go around it, let's face it, the afternoons, especially in a small area where you only have one learning support teacher, case manager within the building, you're bombarded with meetings of parents and staff meetings and IET meetings. And all of those things that come at us, that sometimes you're so over meeting, that you don't actually have time to sit down with the team and debrief.

But what I find in those cases is, having touch-ins throughout the day, check in with them, make sure that things are okay. Having those more informal conversations after the fact. We might not be able to sit down as an entire team, but I need to make sure that the EA or the child and youth care worker that is with that child during that event, the teacher, that they're okay, and that they're taking care of their mental health and finding out ways that I can support them. Because when we can't meet all as a team, we need to still support each other and be there for each other. I'm in a cohort this year, as one of the support teachers within that cohort. We have one little guy in there whose parents are going through a divorce and we're seeing huge escalations of behaviour.

One of the things that I'm noticing, our school is designed really weird, where you have to walk through my classroom to get to another classroom. Thankfully our classrooms are joined, and so I can hear in that classroom, what's going on and I can hear the escalation of the student. I can hear him escalating, but I can also hear his teacher escalating. And so that's when I know, okay, she needs help. I'm going to step in there. I'm going to get him out, get him calm and regulated back down again and try and reenter him into the classroom. At the end of the day, I didn't know at the time when I first did it, it wasn't actually a plan that we had created together, but I went after school, and just was like, "Hey, I'm sorry for stepping in." She's like, "No, thank you for that. I totally needed you in that moment, and I didn't know that I needed you, but that works perfectly. If you hear that again, please come and take."

And so we actually have, because I'm teaching prep in that classroom as well. There's been another time when she's noticed the same thing and was able to do the same thing. Just even that little shift of people sometimes it's enough to get a lid back down, even partially to get them back in the moment. Those little time, even just little conversations with your staff are huge. And the debrief process, even if it's not a formal meeting.

Debriefs: Fiona

Regan Rankin

Giving permission to tap in and out, is something that is so critical that we've been really trying to reinforce in our school, in our district, is that nonjudgmental approach to going sometimes, and having some mechanism of communicating when you need tapping in or out. Because it may not always be appropriate in the moment. But sometimes just having somebody that has your back, when the principal

comes in or an EA comes in, or somebody comes in, it's just, I think we need to take some pressure off ourselves sometimes. Sometimes there are some kids that are not everybody's cup of tea.

Sometimes I know that Sarah, she doesn't work in my district, but Sarah might have a much better relationship with Lily or a different kind of relationship or in that moment, she needs some humor or some laughter, and using a variety of skillsets and knowing who's there and who can help you. I can take your class, if you can take the situation, can be a huge asset. And so when places with smaller communities or smaller staffs, some of these things, it's just super important. We need to kind of, I think teachers really, sometimes me for example, feel really, like, it's my student, I need to deal with it, I'm responsible. But I think we have to be able to non-judgmentally help each other. It's so, so important to do that.

Dean Shareski

Well, I just think back to my own experience, how many times I felt guilty because I thought it was a bad teacher. I'm sure many of the things that I did were bad decisions I made. I own that, at the same time schools are not structured intentionally to be fluid as you're speaking of where we weave in and out and can support each other. I think to your point, Regan, about making that an okay thing, that we do that. I can think of experiences where the teacher next door was a savior to be able to come in and support. It wasn't just the administrator that handled these things, is that we did this, we talk about schools as community, but sometimes it requires us to be intentional.

What about your experience, Fiona, with the idea of debrief? Because I think when we talked, when we were prepping for this, you mentioned that that's not part of your schools or districts practice, but maybe I'm wrong around that. Tell me about the debrief experience on your end.

Fiona James

No, we do do them. It's very, very important. Somebody asked a question, is it important to do it right that day? Sometimes it's not. Sometimes you are so emotional in the height of that moment, that even an hour later, you're still not down. Sometimes the next day can be an okay time to debrief. I think often what we don't do enough of is, sometimes debrief being with the student, as a team approach sometimes and letting them know that there's several people on the team that care about you. The other thing is, that somebody said, and so I wrote it down, was, does the student know the plan? Really making sure, even young students can really understand, when you do this, this is going to be the next step. Right? I think that's really important.

Consequences: Perveen

Dean Shareski

I'm going to start with Perveen on this one, but as you tell the story and I think about the Lily example or your guy with Perveen, that you mentioned. Sometimes these behaviors are a risk to themselves or there's others. And so we think about, well, there needs to be consequences and maybe that's part of the plan if it happens, but I'm sure there's times where something happens that we just see and feel like, there has to be some justice here, whatever that is. It's just an instinct we have, like, okay, a child has done something to harm others or themselves, what's going to happen to them and how that impacts the rest of the school or whatever else may be. Perveen, what's your thoughts on that idea of consequences in these situations?

Perveen Engineer

Thanks, Dean. One thing just to go back to Fiona and having the student as a part of the plan, ties into what you're saying, Dean. I think also Regan had touched on it a bit previous, is contingency mapping, social mapping, trying to figure out what the plan is that way and the behavior. Ross Greene does a brilliant, living in the balance.org is his website and Collaborative Problem Solving with the students. One thing it is, that that student exhibits. I noticed that when we do math, you start throwing your pencil across. This just reminds me of, I'll give you an example of a consequence. I was in a class to help the teacher with some of the behaviors of this one student.

Like, "Oh, watch, I can trigger it." I'm like, "Well, if you know what his trigger is, why are you doing it?" But just to show me. And so it was like, "You got to finish that math now." And then boom. And then he just storms out, throws everything everywhere and leaves. Next thing is, "Well, you need to go to the office not outside." So now we're escalating, escalating, escalating. And eventually we got him down. I went to him and I said, look, you got finish that math question before gym, which is at 2:40. 2:39, he sits down, he does the math question, everything's [inaudible]. When we look at those consequences, there's different types of consequences, right?

There's punitive, and then there's positive consequences. And that's PBIS, it's a positive consequence. You do something, you're rewarded positive. And then we have negative consequences. And sometimes when you think of somebody who's coming from a trauma background, and they're in that fight or flight or freeze and their behavior is, I need to manage the behavior in the moment, but my long-term plan is to change it. But I have to be mindful that a consequence isn't going to change that behavior, that relationship, that consistency, that safety, that social, emotional learning of co-regulating, teaching self-awareness self-management, is huge. And that is more important for our students, depending on what the behavior is.

If it's coming from a trauma base. That's my go to, instead of negatively, because ultimately my goal in life is if I can keep kids out of the system and I can give them the best chance they can to be the best person they can be, I'm doing a great job. And so consequences, negative, punitive, for kids based in trauma, it doesn't help. It only reinforces, reinforces. Another person who is really good with that is, Sam Himelstein, who has a center for adolescent studies based in trauma and mindfulness. I think that would be a resource or whatever. He talks about incarceration, the consequence, the negative consequence. It's just a cyclical until we learn to change that behavior. So manage the behavior in the moment and change the behavior. We're looking to change that and to teach that.

Consequences: Regan

Dean Shareski

No, that was good. Other perspectives on the idea of consequences and your philosophy and approach to that. Regan, do you have any thoughts on how you deal with consequences?

Regan Rankin

Well, I think what Perveen was saying, I actually will do whole class instruction on positive and negative consequences. Everything we do has a consequence. I think a lot of kids, all the way up to high school, this is the lessons that I've taught about. What is a consequence? Almost every time, they'll say, when you get your X-Box taken away or when my mom takes my phone away, but actually you can talk about, okay, but when you give somebody a card, what is the consequence of that? Oh, they feel happy. They

feel cared for, right? There are different types of consequences. I think some of these things, a lot of universal design for learning type things, you're teaching this to everybody.

And so then when you're having to do some of these plans with students, you talk about those, your choice, make a good choice. I use a lot of common language in my teaching, and making a good choice is, okay, so you've got, if we do this, this way, we're going this way or we're going this way. I am not choosing the consequence, you are. Sometimes that's a really challenging thing to get kids to understand. And so that's why I use the contingency maps, the visual supports, those sort of things. Building these things with kids is important. So starting with the problem and then working it through and teaching them that it's okay if they make a few mistakes. I have a contingency map, which starts with the problem and then goes down, okay, the math questions look too hard.

Then you ripped off your paper. Then you started swearing. Then you got sent out of class. Well, let's back up, you ripped up the paper, you can still make a different choice at that point. This does not mean you're going directly to jail, right? You can make a good choice at this point. You ripped up your paper, then you swore, you can still fix your behavior to go up, to making a more positive choices at that point. You maybe need to ask for help to help calm down, help regulate yourself, to make that choice, but you can always do that. I think just some of this teaching, I think we forget to just break it down and very explicitly teach some of these things, which is important.

Consequences: Sarah

Dean Shareski

Sarah, do you want to add any thoughts to that?

Sarah Brooks

No, I think it's really important that people in general are aware of what positive and negative consequences are. I think that's why positive discipline works. Right? It's focusing on the positives. And so often we hear somebody mentioned it earlier. It's like, well, that student didn't do this. I think, Regan. And you're like, well, now you're watching a Disney movie with her and it's like, well, I see that as a positive reward when really it's that grounding piece. It's not necessarily a positive consequence, and there's also the negative to both sides. Students need to be aware that an action is, then there's a reaction, right? Whether it's positive or negative.

Dean Shareski

And to help students and everybody understand that we're moving away from a factory model where everybody gets treated the same way, everybody gets the same experience, to understanding, we have individual human beings with different needs and we should be giving them different experiences. And that's sometimes is a difficult thing, particularly for younger students to understand why Lily gets a different pathway, and that's just part of dementedly understanding that, but it's a big thing to process. But I think, so much of the things that you've stated here today are going to help us get to a place where those are less and less of an issue, and just the way we do things.

Sarah Brooks

Well, and it's also important to remember that kids are not in control of their behaviors once their lid has flipped. Oftentimes the consequences that we're giving to these kids are reactionary on our part. They make us feel better, somewhat, but the kids don't connect it to the issue that happened. We need to really be careful and make sure that we're not making these kids feel terrible for reacting to a

situation where they felt they couldn't control, or they couldn't behave in that situation. In the case where Regan was talking about, the questions on math looked really hard, they didn't have that ability to say at that moment, oh my gosh, these are hard, I need to ask for help.

They saw this, it triggered an alarm and then they exploded. So now we're punishing them for the piece that they couldn't actually control, was that behavior that came from them not thinking. We really need to be careful when we talk about consequences and punishments, as to what purpose does it actually serve. And are we supporting the child development in giving a punishment, regardless of what the people, oftentimes it's parents and other students, what they see on the outside, as of what we're doing. Now we need to come up with a plan to be proactive to support that child, so they don't get to that place as opposed to punishing them for flipping the desk or running out of the classroom.

Regan Rankin

Well, I think that's the thing that's hugely important. The biggest, the number one consequence that drives me a little bit crazy, is when people want a kid to say, sorry. It's become a trigger for me. Because in that moment, often, especially if it's... I've had a student run down the hall and rip art off the wall, and it's really upsetting, and I'm not minimizing that behavior. It's really upsetting to have your artwork ripped off the wall and all of this. But in that moment, that student was so dysregulated that they actually don't even remember doing what they were doing. So then the next day they come back and you're asking them to apologize to all the kids or all the teachers, which did happen, was so hard for the student, really had no idea what they were apologizing for.

And couldn't really articulate it. It wasn't super meaningful and what it actually ended up doing was re-triggering behavior. If a student authentically chooses to apologize, that's great, but when we're making them do something, I prefer to sit down and say, wow, okay. So yesterday we had this thing, right? There was art, it ripped off. It was really hard. How do you think we're going to fix this? How can I help you figure out what to do? Looking at that collaborative problem solving, what was hard, what started that? And looking at fixing that underlying issue, is far more effective for a long term game. Apologizing is for us. That's just something to keep in mind as well.

Tips for Educators

Dean Shareski

Well, I can tell you that, had I attended a session like this when I first started teaching, it would have saved me a lot of problems, I think. I just want to thank you as we wrap up, I'm a big fan of a pro tip and a pro tip I'll define as being just a real quick one or two sentences, thing to take away. I'm going to ask each of you for, what's the one thing, what's the pro tip you would leave the audience thinking about? It could just be a bit of a summary from the things you've already said, but just that one key idea that you think you'd like everybody to think about implement or ponder as they move forward, dealing with kids who've been traumatized. We'll start with the order that I had you speak in. I will go with, Sarah, Regan, Fiona, and then Perveen. What's your pro tip Sarah?

Sarah Brooks

I think my pro tip is to watch out for that Bluetooth, that when a child is in an escalation stage, that you don't get sucked into it also. Find what works for you, even if it is to take a step out of the room for a second, or to breathe, or take a drink of water, keep your brain engaged, so that you can effectively deal with the problem and not get sucked into the behaviors that they're displaying as well.

Dean Shareski
Regan, pro tip.

Regan Rankin
Pro tip. I think committing to using positive language and approaching situations with humor and reframing your thinking around these things, is something that has worked for me. I think, don't ever undervalue a well-placed joke.

Dean Shareski
I don't know if you stole Fiona's or not, but Fiona, do you have a pro tip?

Fiona James
I know, she did. I was like, yeah, it's that empowering language, right? That we often use and how we can rephrase it. Instead of saying, you need to sit and focus, to saying, okay, I can see that you're struggling with focus. What is something that you can do to help you focus? The other thing I was going to say is, one strategy that works for one student, isn't going to work from them all. Sometimes it takes multiple strategies and figuring it out. Sometimes it's just trial Excellent. Perveen. and error and it takes time and patience. And to give yourself a pat on the back.

Dean Shareski
Excellent. Perveen.

Perveen Engineer
What Sarah, Regan and Fiona said. No. Just also, first and foremost, be kind to yourself and know it's okay you don't understand. Ask yourself the question though, what am I missing? I think that's very important, is like, there's something here I'm not understanding, what is it? One thing that does work is, just that relationship piece. Like Fiona said, one thing doesn't work for another student, but I always remember if I give kids directives, there are close choices, my office or the gym, right? Clear, simple language is really important. And just letting them know you're there for them. I'm here for you when you're ready. Simple. There's non-judgemental approach. It's the relationship, is the key to everything.