Making SPACE for Learning

Trauma Informed Practice in Schools

Discussion Paper 10
Revisiting the SMART PRACTICE framework for supporting traumatized children

Introduction

The intent of this paper is to generate discussion. The paper provides an opportunity for readers to share specific knowledge and strategies. It also poses a series of questions to further enhance reader responses to working with the SMART PRACTICE framework.

This discussion paper acknowledges the SMART-ER program (Strategies for Managing Abuse Related Trauma = Educational Reform) as an extension of the program and its application in South Australian schools through action based research. Given the focus of the SMART-ER program is the application of the SMART PRACTICE framework, this paper comes at an opportune time to review the framework and provide specific strategy ideas for each of the SMART PRACTICE elements. This paper gives readers the opportunity to reflect on their current application of the framework, suggested strategies and provide their own ideas and applications to build their practice repertoire.

Section 1: Reviewing the SMART PRACTICE framework

Predictable

Traumatised children experience any change as a possible threat. Building an environment that is as sensorily familiar as possible reduces threat responses.

Reflection: *In your school or workplace, what processes or procedures do you have in place to help traumatised children manage staff changes?*

Specific strategies to support this element might include:

- Induction processes for new staff and TRT's reflect the consistent model of responding to children at the site.

- Set up a "shadow board" of items student/child will need for each session or class.

- Transition warnings could be multi-modal eg: music, cue cards, colours.

- Involve the child/ren in any room changes

Responsive

Responses to children's behaviour should always stem from an understanding of the trauma-based origins of that behaviour. This may mean a disciplining framework is not always the best path.

Reflection: *How have you specifically responded to a child or young person's behaviour while maintaining your relationship with them?*

Specific strategies to support this element might include:

- Provide a space for calming down that contains reminders of the individual teacher or key person eg: photos, pieces of clothing, specific pen etc.

- Explore and incorporate the idea of "time in" rather than "time out". What will it look like in the context of your school/centre?

- Utilise restorative principles and questions but clear about expectations. In many instances, you may need to lead the restorative responses.

- Notice attempts at behaviour changes, not just successes. Provide positive feedback quietly and non-effusively.

Attuned

Because trauma is fundamentally a disintegrative process, children are often disconnected from their own emotional and physiological responses. The more we can understand patterns and processes of responding, the better able we are to understand the child and help them to understand their own reactions.

Reflection: *In reflecting on the children with whom you work, what patterns of emotional responding have you identified? How did you undertake that tracking process?*

Specific strategies to support this element might include:

- Reflect on teaching strategies that seem to escalate behaviour and equally, that support calm. Feed this back to the whole staff team.

- Set up a feelings feedback loop between school/centre and home and/or after care.

- Support the child to understand experiences of happiness and joy- and any patterns associated with those.

- Ensure that attunement incorporates physiological responses and is not just a linguistic exercise.

Connecting

To begin the healing process, traumatised children need to start with a process of feeling reconnected to themselves- their feelings, their physical responses and their strengths.

Reflection: *Children who have experienced trauma need to build a repertoire of success, rather than a litany of failure. How often do you help these children experience success? How?*

Specific strategies to support this element might include:

- Build a symbolic emotional vocabulary considering accessing all the senses eg: textures, sounds/music, colours.

- Use photography to connect the child's inner sensations with external representation.

- Make specific links between activities and capacity or skills.

- Understand the child may feel overwhelmed by their own emotional responses so provide an environment that enables them to experience regulation.

Translating

The way we structure a story of understanding about our experiences is a crucial integrative process for engaging with life. Children who have experienced trauma struggle to build those stories of understanding because of the impacts of that trauma.

Reflection: *How do you provide a record of the children's time with you to each individual child? How often do you review it with the child?*

Specific strategies to support this element might include:

- Link current work/activities to possible futures.

- Meaning making does not need to be language based.

- Provide fun experiences for all children "just because"- not as a reward for a particular behaviour.

- Do calendar activities leading up to significant school/centre events eg: excursion, camp, concert.

Involving

Children who have experienced trauma often struggle with relationships with their peers. However, these relationships can be a source of healing and nurturing when developed and supported.

Reflection: *What strategies or programs do you have in place that build friendship skills, tolerance, respect and safety?*

Specific strategies to support this element might include:

- Building social groups around areas of interest not social capacity.

- Consider developmental sequencing of play. Provide opportunities for parallel play- regardless of the age of the child (including into adolescence)

- Provide structured activities for recess and lunchtime- this does not have to be teacher directed and does not have to include implements.

- The value of staff modelling social skills cannot be underestimated.

Calming

Invariably, traumatised children are in a constant state of high arousal. To facilitate positive outcomes for these children at all levels (ie: educationally, socially, emotionally etc) we need to provide and support experiences of calm on a consistent and repetitive basis.

Reflection: *Within your role and your site, how can you provide consistent, rhythmic experiences of lowered arousal which is non-verbal? Does this mirror the soothing actions we might use with a very young child?*

Specific strategies to support this element might include:

- Provide rhythmic repeated calming activities or environments that mirror early soothing.

- Utilise calming activities that focus the child's attention eg: fishtank, mindfulness, yoga poses.

- Be very clear of your own calmness levels to maintain your own capacity to think clearly and effectively.

- Work specifically around understanding what calm "feels like".

Engaging

As with calming, the element of engaging children in relationship is fundamental to our work with traumatised children. The experience of appropriate, supportive adult-child relational exchanges is instrumental to supporting children who have experienced abuse related trauma.

Reflection: *How do you ensure that all adults in your workplace respond in a consistent way to traumatised children?*

Specific strategies to support this element might include:

- How do staff access support in their work with traumatised children? Is it with external agencies and/or processes within the school/centre?

- Understand the child's experience of relationships within the school/centre.

- Ongoing support and T&D for staff is important for consistency of response.

- Link to all other relationship based policies and processes eg: anti-bullying, code of conduct.

Section 2. Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Please share one of your responses to the reflection questions included in this paper.

2. What is one strategy you would add those outlined in this paper? What difference have you seen with its use in your setting?

3. Have you used the SMART PRACTICE framework more with individuals, groups or classes of children?

4. Please share any other thoughts you have about the framework as a whole.