COVID-19
School Reopening
Social/Emotional Considerations

2020

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School Re-Entry Concerns

Teachers, paraeducators, administrators, and others are concerned about students' social/emotional functioning over the protracted school closures. Schools are asking themselves:

- How will students react to returning to school?
- What social/emotional supports will students need?
- How can I best support my students?

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COVID-19 Social/Emotional Considerations

This training covers social/emotional considerations:

A) How children develop self-control

B) Likely implications for children returning to school, following COVID-19 school closures

C) Social/emotional considerations for schools to address to foster student self control

What We Don't Know

We **don't know** how students will return; will students demonstrate:

- excitement, relief and/or joy about returning to school?
- more challenging behaviors?
- more dysregulated behaviors?
- increasingly withdrawn behaviors?
- an increased risk of self-harm and suicidal behaviors?

Are we prepared?

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What We Do Know

(We know that science doesn't really know anything but questions everything.)

We **do know** how children develop:

- emotional regulation
- healthy engagement
- resiliency
- the capacity to heal from emotional trauma

Exposure to emotional trauma reduces social/emotional functioning.

We Also Know

We know a lot. We know:

- how neuroscience-informed practices guide interactions
- evidence-based interventions
- Meta-analysis (collections of empirical investigations) demonstrates that the adult-child relationship is the strongest predictor of emotional growth (Shedler, 2010).

We KNOW it's the relationship that counts.

Emotional Regulation

Children develop the capacity to manage and control their emotional experience, increase their resiliency, and heal from emotional trauma through self-esteem. Self-esteem is the "glue" that holds kids together.

Children develop self-esteem through important relationships with adults. These relationships must include three ingredients:

- **Idealization**
- **Empathy**
- **Belonging**

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Emotional Regulation

Self-Esteem = Self-Worth

I am worth the investment of learning how to regulate my emotions and behaviors.

My teacher is somebody important, my teacher likes me, so I can be somebody important too.

Idealization

Students expect teachers to know how to care for them. Kids are supposed to look up to teachers' capacity to care for them. Teachers are supposed to know what to do.

For many kids, teachers are like firefighters! Everyone is secure knowing they can be rescued by firefighters.

How do adults foster healthy idealization?

Through structuring and authenticity.

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Idealization

- Structuring – communicates the adult can handle the child's feelings and behaviors. How to provide structure:
  - Clear expectations:
    - Classroom routines and schedules
    - Rules of conduct that staff can uphold
  - Generational boundaries:
    - The adult is in charge and while supportive of the children, does not let the children "run the show."

- Authenticity – be real with the student, bring yourself into the relationship:
  - Children know when adults are being phony, and they can't look up to phony adults.
  - Trust your own good judgement.

Idealization Example

Timmy came to the alternative classroom, because he was ripping posters off the wall, punching other students, and refusing to follow directions. His teacher, guidance counselor, principal, and MTSS-B coordinator did their best to help Timmy, but nothing worked. Timmy talked-back, intimidated peers, and sometimes ran out of the school building.

The alternative school staff hypothesized that Timmy needed to idealize the structure of the classroom. Timmy needed very clear boundaries and expectations, and adults who could maintain them while caring deeply for Timmy.

After three days of a predictable routine and staff providing clear consequences for Timmy, Timmy stopped hitting others and tearing up papers. Timmy completed academics on time, each day.

Timmy knew that his teacher could contain his behaviors and handle his big feelings.

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Idealization

I am worth having a teacher who knows what she is doing.

Empathy

- Children need empathy to develop self-esteem. Empathy helps kids regulate their emotions.

- What does empathy look like?
  - Taking on the other's perspective
    - Imagining, sensing, feeling, thinking what the experience is like for the student, while putting your own experience to the side, momentarily.

  - Empathy as data collection
    - Imagining where the student is coming from, or what they may be feeling, allows staff to create a hypothesis and then an intervention to test it. (If Sarah feels lonely and not worth anything, and that's why she refuses to engage in academics, perhaps an increased sense of belonging will allow her to become part of the class and buckle down to her work with her peers.)

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Empathy

- Validating communicates empathy:
  - Mirroring
    - Match the child's behavior – meet a smile with a smile

  - Language
    - "I wonder if this math worksheet is really frustrating?"
    - "Mad?"
    - "How lonely?"

If you say "at least" it's not empathy.

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Empathy Example

During a math lesson, Tyler again tore up his worksheets. His teacher saw his distress and moved her chair beside him and sat quietly. Tyler held the paper in his hands, glaring at her, but did not tear it up. She slid her chair back a little, sensing she was maybe too close. Tyler put the paper on his desk and put his head down. After another few moments of silence, his teacher asked, "Mad?"

Tyler replied, "No!"

Following a moment of reflection, the teacher wondered aloud, "Feel alone with this?"

Tyler looked up at her, and mumbled, "Hmm."

His teacher picked up a pencil and said, "Let's start this together."

Tyler completed the worksheet without further outburst.

Empathy

I am worth being known and understood.

Belonging

- Belonging, for children, is the sense that they share a similarity to the adults in their lives. You are like me, and I am like you. Together we share a sameness. Together we can accomplish goals.

- VanDerHeide (2012) writes that belonging, or a feeling of sameness, begins just after birth and is vital in childhood development.

- Belonging provides the "confirmation of the feeling that one is a human being among other human beings" (Kohut, 1984, p. 200).

Belonging

- Feeling similar:
  - Children are at their best when they experience themselves as like others.
    - (Lichtenberg, 1991)

- Emotional closeness:
  - Shared evocative experiences

Think *The Breakfast Club*

Belonging Example

Aaron made it to first base in a class game of kickball. He began to melt down. He screamed in total fear. His teacher, Heidi, saw his distress. She offered to hold his hand and run the bases with him. Aaron and Heidi ran the bases, and for a moment, Aaron belonged to her.

Years later, Aaron struggled with intense suicidal ideation. Again Heidi found him. She referred him to counseling, but it was clear to everyone how important she was to him.

Belonging

I am worthy of membership in the group.

Further Reading on the Three Relational Ingredients

For more information on all three relational ingredients, see:

Reducing Anger and Violence in Schools: An Evidence – Based Approach (Ketterer, 2020).

COVID-19 Disrupted These Three Relational Ingredients

Despite the best efforts of caring, committed teachers, support staff, and administrators, school closures have impeded the adults' ability to provide these relational ingredients to students.

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What is Emotional Trauma?

- Beyond the scope of normal human experience

- The psychophysiological response to highly distressing or life-threatening events

- Typically refers to an experience of serious adversity or terror

- Key element in traumatic experience: lack of control to change or stop events

- Leaves a lasting physiologic impact on body and mind

- Can be a single event

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Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

"Adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs, are potentially traumatic events. For example:
- experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect
- witnessing violence in the home or community
- having a family member attempt or die by suicide
- substance misuse
- mental health problems
- instability due to parental separation or household members being in jail or prison

ACEs are linked to chronic health problems, mental illness, and substance misuse in adulthood."

CDC website

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Trauma - A Deeper Look

How do we get through our chaotic world?

Trauma - A Deeper Look

We Lie!

Trauma - A Deeper Look

Although we tell ourselves little lies to get through life,

self-deception isn't the road to mental health.

Trauma – A Deeper Look

This gets philosophical.

When we told our students, "Goodbye, see you Monday morning," we didn't know if we were actually going to see them again. It's a hope and kind of a white lie. Most of the time, it's no big deal.

Children are able to live in our chaotic world because they believe these simple lies. They trust us, believe that they will see us again, and most of the time they do. In the philosophy around trauma, these lies are called *absolutisms* (Stolorow, 2007).

Trauma - A Deeper Look

When children are exposed to ACE's it shatters these lies or *absolutisms.* Emotional trauma is bad because children can't believe our lies. They have proof that the world is chaotic, and we can't convince them otherwise. Thus emotional trauma:

- psychologically disorganizes children
- separates them from the kids who believe our absolutisms or white lies

COVID-19

Thus schools closing because of COVID-19 was traumatic for many students.

Post-COVID-19
Social/Emotional Predictions

Some children's social/emotional functioning is likely to be stronger. They are returning to school having spent months working on projects at home, having felt deeply cared for. They have had increased exposure to the variables that make them healthy.

Some students will have experienced extreme isolation and loss. They miss school, but we predict after enough time, they will acculturate back into the school community.

Unfortunately, some children, are likely, due to the absence of important relationships with teachers and faculty, to return to school with heightened social/emotional difficulties. In the worse case scenario, we predict the potential for an increased risk in suicidality for school-aged children whose schools have been closed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Disrupted Self-Esteem due to COVID-19

The first step is time. Time for:

adult self-care
adult self-care
adult self-care

Then meet students' needs.

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Post-COVID-19

Strengthen referral streams for mental health services for struggling students. Be prepared. Know the signs.

- Listen carefully
- Wonder about the meaning of the behavior
- Strengthen the parent-school alliance
- Reach out

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COVID-19

Impeded teachers' abilities to provide students the ingredients necessary for self-esteem.

- **Idealization**
- **Empathy**
- **Belonging**

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Disrupted Idealization

We suspect that many children, although we did nothing wrong, may blame us, the responsible adults, for the pandemic. Furthermore, some children may believe social distancing and school closures occurred because we either weren't competent enough to stop the pandemic or because deep-down, we disliked them. This means that for many children their inner experience may be one of abandonment.

- In short, these kids have been robbed of their belief in our capacity to care for them. In their minds, the adults have failed them.

- Which also may lead to feelings that their own badness caused their exclusion from school.

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Disrupted Empathy

- Teachers don't like working from their homes and students sense their dislike and falsely assume that the teachers dislike them.

- Teachers are less confident in their teaching abilities in this unfamiliar terrain, and this is compounded by low student attendance rates.

- Teachers have a greatly diminished "sense" of what is going on for their students and it is much more difficult to determine if the students are following along.

- It's more difficult to hold our attention while working on the screen, our eyes may hurt, and many teachers have less than ideal workspaces.

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Disrupted Empathy

- Working from home for many people includes not only teaching but parenting, which divides the attention of even the most committed teacher.

- We, along with our students, may be exposed to traumatizing events online in our students' homes. The boundaries between home and school have all but disappeared.

- We cannot consequence children for disruptive behavior without further abandoning them, as the only real consequence is to mute them or expel them from the online meeting.

- Teachers have lost their "spidy" sense.

Disrupted Empathy

- When people experience empathic failure (and because teachers have not been able to spend time with their students, this has unfortunately happened) it can be traumatizing.
  - Ketterer (2020) cites Kohut, "...empathy is so important to children and adults that when important people do not empathize with us, it is traumatizing" (p.19).
  - If students have parents or other adults in their lives providing empathic attunement, the trauma will be mitigated to varying degrees.
- COVID-19 has been terribly frightening to many people, it is a situation that feels utterly out of our control.
  - For those children who do not have access to empathic adults outside of school, this time will be that much more traumatizing.
  - Without an empathic relationship, "Painful affect states become unendurable – that is traumatic" (Stolorow, 2008, p.2).
  - "Painful or frightening affect becomes traumatic when the attunement that the child needs to assist in its tolerance, containment and integration is profoundly absent" (Stolorow, 2008, p.2).

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Disputed Belonging

- A sense of belonging is directly related to self-harming and suicidal behavior (Joiner, 2005).

- Joiner discovered that the two largest predictors of suicidal ideation are a thwarted sense of belonging and a perceived sense of burdensomeness.

- Belonging is important. It is one of the primary ingredients that children require to develop the capacity for emotional control.

Disrupted Belonging

Schools have magical powers.

Disrupted Belonging

Schools are magic, because they transform children into students.

Schools provide children with purpose, role, and reasonability. They provide meaning.

How Schools Develop Belonging

- Children belong in school. Everyone knows that Monday through Friday from autumn to summer children go to school. Schools transform children into students. Children play. Students learn.

- School provides children important rituals. These rituals provide meaning and purpose. The purpose of the school is to educate youth. In turn, a child's job becomes to learn. In this light, school provides: a role and purpose. This is important because purpose, role, and task reduce the perceived sense of burdensomeness.

Disrupted Belonging

- COVID-19 has disrupted schools' ability to provide children a sense of belonging.

- We predict that schools closing disrupts their sense of belonging and purpose. Their safe haven of the school is denied to them.

- Their experience is that they do not belong in the school, because the school community is closed to them. They are denied their typical access to teachers, academics, friends, as well as the countless rituals that define a school day.

- For these children, they may no longer feel they are a human surrounded by other human beings. Their isolation, being away from others, may worsen to loneliness and a sense of being different from others.

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Schools Resolve Burdensomeness

- Schools insulate children from feeling burdensome to their families. In the child's mind, schools can effortlessly provide for them. They have a safe, clean classroom, meals, a playground and the other students with whom to play and learn.

- Students have a job and purpose at school, their job is to do their schoolwork.

- Students who have been at home, throughout COVID-19, may have experienced a loss of a sense of purpose, almost as if they have been fired from their job. And maybe they also experience themselves as a strain on their family, as parents now have to teach them (an added stressor) amidst an already very stressful time.

Decreased Belonging and Increased Burdensomeness

- Because school closings have prevented schools from meeting these needs, children may have a decreased sense of belonging and an increased sense of burdensomeness.

- This is noteworthy because both of these interpersonal variables are closely associated with suicide.

- In short, belonging and purpose are directly related to suicide.

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Loneliness and Isolation

We think that isolation and loneliness are different.

- Isolation = when you can't connect to others that are like you.

  Social gatherings fix isolation. I am with you.

- Loneliness = when you experience no one else is like you.

  Sharing a similar emotional, intellectual, educational experience addresses loneliness. We are the same. (VanDerHeide, 2012)

Cyberball – Exclusion Hurts

- We know, through neurological research findings, that feeling excluded (being isolated), hurts.

- In the Cyberball studies, participants were placed in an fMRI scanner, while playing a videogame that involved passing a virtual ball back and forth. The researchers excluded the participants in the scanners.

- It became apparent that social exclusion from the Cyberball game activated the same part of the brain that is activated when we feel physical pain.

- Being excluded is painful. COVID-19 and subsequent school closures have resulted, for many, in painful feelings of exclusion and isolation.

The Role of Attachment

Clinical wisdom suggests that many children work overtime to hold themselves together when in abusive, unempathic milieus. However, attachment research indicates that traumatized children often struggle once they enter a caring, supportive environment. Thus, many students may really struggle after they return to the caring environment of their school.

For many traumatized children:

Safe Environment = Worse Behaviors

What Schools Can Do

- **Repair Belonging**
  - Rituals, which are inherently meaningful, can foster a sense of belonging.
  - Allow time for peer relationships, both in and out of the classroom

- **Repair Idealization**
  - Routines and classroom expectations, to create a predictable environment
  - Authentic interactions with students, while maintaining generational boundaries

- **Repair Empathy**
  - To gather data about what each child needs

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Repair Belonging
Rituals

Consider the types of rituals that were important to you and your students before COVID-19. What was important?

For something to be a ritual, it must be meaningful. What rituals can you co-create with students?

Tips

- Allow time for yourself and students to build rituals into the day.
- Make it fun for you and your students.
- Some students (think of our Tier III students, who we are most concerned about) may benefit from one-on-one rituals with a trusted adult.

Repair Belonging
Rituals

- Some examples of rituals that have been used in classrooms and with individual students include:
  - Teachers have developed end-of-the-day goodbye rituals, as simple as going around the circle and saying goodbye with words or movements.
  - Weekly breakfast
  - Time to share music
  - Time to play games with the teacher and peers

- One-on-one rituals might include:
  - Daily specialized chores with an adult
  - One-on-one activities (not used as a reward, but at a predictable time), such as games and art, with an adult with whom they share an authentic relationship
  - Giving a student a special chocolate milk every lunch time

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Repair Belonging
Young Students

- Routines and rituals
  - Schedules
  - Predictability
  - Morning meeting
  - Jobs
- Idealizable teacher who sets the tone of the classroom culture
- Peer group in the classroom
- Time
  - to play and interact
  - group time with peers

Repair Belonging
Middle and High School Students

- Friends!

- What about kids who don't have friends (Tier III)?
  - May first need a sense of belonging with:
  - A trusted adult
  - Classroom community or other small group (perhaps run by the guidance counselor or other staff person)

- Sports and other clubs and activities

- Time – to build these relationships

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Repair Idealization

- Routines
  - Predictable routines and a predictable environment allow us to become adaptive to what is going on around us.
  - If the adults can maintain a (reasonably) predictable schedule / routine, they teach the student that they "have got it!"

- Classroom and school-wide expectations
  - Adults holding students accountable to the expectations allows students to understand that the adults are competent and capable.

- Authentic communication with generational boundaries
  - Adults being able to interact with students while maintaining the adult / student paradigm shows the child that the adult is up to the task of meeting the child's needs and handling their feelings.

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Repair Empathy

- Taking on another's perspective to gather data

- Imagine the student's experience and allow what you imagine to inform developing a hypothesis.

    - For example, "I wonder if Jessica is feeling overwhelmed by all of this change and unsure of who is in charge?"

- This hypothesis can then inform developing an intervention.

    - For example, if Jessica doesn't know who is in charge, she may benefit from explicit structuring and a clear understanding of who is responsible for holding her accountable for her academics and behavior.

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The Three Ingredients are Fluid

- Different students need different relational ingredients.
  - While almost everyone has a loss of belonging, the other relational ingredients are also important.

- Ask permission or be an invited guest
  - Despite an adult's best intentions, if a student does not want to talk about their feelings, pressuring them isn't helpful.
  - Offer the opportunity to do so, and then follow the student's lead.

Remember we can only be the special person for a student it they ask us! (Tolpin, 2001)

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Forgiveness

- Forgive ourselves:
  - allow ourselves to acknowledge our own losses
  - be patient with our own re-entry process
  - allow us to move forward

- Ask our students for their forgiveness:
  - be authentic
  - acknowledging that the adults let them down
  - allow them to move forward

- Forgive our students:
  - Hey why did you mute me?
  - I worked night and day on lesson plans you didn't even answer the zoom.

COVID-19 was crumby for many.

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The Good News

- The good news is schools already embody the relational ingredients and provide children purpose.

- This model invites adults to rethink the things schools already do, a little differently.

- Going forward from COVID-19 requires time to meet the social / emotional needs of students, especially our most vulnerable students.

- It does not require re-inventing the wheel, but rather prioritizing relationships with students.

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Integration with MTSS / PBIS

- The three relational ingredients that are essential to self-esteem are compatible with Multi – Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) as well as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

- Faculty and staff can implement MTSS and PBIS while fostering the three relational ingredients that are essential to developing self-esteem.

- The three relational ingredients impact every child and can be used in conjunction with Tier I, Tier II, and Tier III level supports.

What About the Adults?

- Remember,

    The first step is **time**.

Time for:

adult self-care
adult self-care
adult self-care

Post-COVID-19 Response

Remember schools have magical powers!

Post-COVID-19 Considerations

Schools transform us into teachers.

Hey, COVID-19 disrupted my social/emotional needs too!

Repair Belonging for Staff

- Process Time (Nicholson, 2019)
  - Time each day to check in about students
  - Time each day or at least once a week for staff to connect, without an agenda

- Meaningful Rituals
  - Time for staff to co-create rituals for the grown-ups
  - Such as coffee or Friday breakfasts
  - Check-ins
  - It's the little things that matter

Repair Idealization for Staff

- Looking to administrators to "have it."

- Predictable environment and routine

- Provide a school milieu that encourages professional authenticity

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Repair Empathy for Staff

- Validating the range of feelings staff experience (and have experienced) throughout the school closings and upon return to the school environment.

- Allowing time for staff to process the challenges of returning to school, in a professional yet authentic manner.

- This has been a difficult time for many of us.

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Summer Time

- Supporting staff can begin before students return.

- Time this summer that is already dedicated to professional development could be used to prioritize the following for faculty and staff:
  - **Idealization**
    - Structure and authenticity
  - **Empathy**
    - Taking on another's perspective
  - **Belonging**
    - Feeling similar and having a purpose.

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For More Information

Please see

Reducing Anger and Violence in Schools: An Evidence-Based Approach

Go to **kettererconsultants.com** to contact us regarding trainings, consultations, and program development.

Dr. Ketterer can be reached at **info@kettererconsultants.com**

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