

Regulation in school for troubled pupils

As Dr Bruce Perry states: ‘*Know the developmental stage and WATCH the state*’ of the troubled pupils in your care. Unfortunately, the behaviorist strategies often used in schools for managing behavior do not take this into account and can escalate already difficult situations. Remember that for pupils to be able to take in what we are saying or ‘to learn’, they need to be in a **calm** or **alert** state. All functions in the brain are state dependent. This known fact is fundamental in the school context and must now be taken very seriously. Around the UK many children and young people are being set up to fail and will continue to be unless we integrate this knowledge into our everyday educational practice. These particular pupils’ emotional and social tasks, expectations and interventions need now to be differentiated using a relational approach that takes into account both the developmental stage and emotional/physiological state of the pupil. This is going to mean individual development planning.

Do remember that for these troubled pupils to be in a position to ‘settle to learn’ they are going to need us to provide relational buffering. Many have experienced relational poverty in their short lives to date and so have not yet learned the internal controls necessary in order to self regulate. Many also have a fragile sense of self, which can mean they move into overwhelm very quickly. *We all learn who we are through the minds and eyes of another, not in isolation.* This means that past and current relational experiences, especially with grown-ups, will strongly affect how these pupils interpret themselves and how they function in the present within the school context. *Every relationship has the power to confirm or challenge all that’s gone on before.* Therefore relationships in school matter. As education staff we can become both the eyes and the minds for the pupil, and the external stress regulators they need at this stage. We can provide the stepping stones necessary towards adaption and recovery so that these pupils learn security and regulation.

Possible states

CALM – ALERT – ALARM – FEAR – TERROR

Many of the pupils in our classes spend most of their time in calm or alert states. This is the optimal state for learning so of course they are going to be at an advantage being able to make the most of all the educative opportunities on offer. However, our troubled pupils spend most of their time in the alarm state, not hearing 40% of the cognitive content being presented, falling behind. These same pupils also move very quickly into fear and terror at different points during the school day. As you can imagine different interventions work at different stages. However, we have based most of our school interventions on the premise that our pupils are either in the calm or alert state – that is, ready to learn. We have set up interventions that work well for the majority (who have experience good enough care by the grown-ups alongside them) but in doing this we have excluded the minority group also present in our schools who are troubled because they have experienced significant relational traumas and losses.

We must now update our practice in line with neuroscience to ensure inclusion on every level.

There are different interventions appropriate for each state so our interventions MUST be state dependent. For example, it would be appropriate to use reassuring touch if a pupil was starting to move into the alarm state but it would be inappropriate to use touch in the same way if the pupil was in the terror state. In fact, if we were to put a hand on their shoulder in this state they may well push us off in self-defense – assuming a threat. It is not appropriate to shout at a pupil in a terrified state. This will probably tip them into further disturbance. We can only wonder many pupils have been excluded by well-intentioned staff using the wrong intervention for the pupil's state.

Rhythm

It is useful to remember that we should take advantage of rhythmic patterns when attempting to change brains. Human beings function best when rhythms are adhered to. Think carefully about how to include tapping, walking, gentle movement, dance, drumming, music into lessons. Dr Bruce Perry recommends integrating rhythm in small doses throughout the school day, rather than just restricting this input to the P.E or music lesson for example. (This is good practice for all pupils regardless of their history or chronological age. We all thrive with rhythm.)

Sensory breaks

Sensory breaks need to be integrated into the usual school day for each and every troubled pupil. This will enable the lower parts of the brain to be soothed, freeing up the higher parts – the thinking cortex – to come online and work optimally. The number and type of sensory breaks will be matched to the pupil's needs, but do use a balanced diet of sensory breaks rather than just one or two.

Do remember to keep watching the state of the pupil as this will inform the type of intervention used. Check how the pupil is whilst engaging in a sensory break and most importantly how they are after a sensory break.

The following sensory breaks are helpful for all of our troubled pupils, but especially the ones who become more hyperactive in their states moving into fight/flight responses. Use sensory breaks that will enable the pupil to slow down and become grounded. For example:

List A

Movement: chair press ups, balancing their body weight for as long as possible on monkey bars, resistance work e.g. pushing against a wall, the use of resistance bands, gardening – especially digging or carrying loads in wheelbarrow, moving/re-arranging classroom furniture, carrying books/equipment/trays

Diet: chewing something that takes a lot of effort – a whole apple, a whole carrot, a chewy snack bar, fruit tubes

Drinks: hot chocolate, tea, cuppa soup

If you notice the pupil is becoming lethargic we would recommend using sensory breaks that energise and activate the pupil. For example:

List B

Movement: running, star jumps, sit-ups, sliding, trampolining, balancing activities that require focus and attention,

Diet: eating an orange, sucking citrus flavoured sweets, sucking mints, fresh juice ice pop

Drinks: drinking water, fresh lemon/lime/orange drinks through a straw

Warning: If you notice that your pupil becomes hyperactive rather than calm/alert after these energizing breaks, then use List A in future sensory breaks for this pupil.

Also, set up a structured, permanent space in the school that can become a **Safe Space** for these pupils to have some download time. Pauses need to be built into the day as school life can be too stimulating, especially for those pupils who are hypervigilant – wired up for survival. Let's be preventative. Time in this space can be used as a sensory break with the adult using this space together with their Key Adult, not alone. Together, co-regulation happens.

For more information on Sensory Attachment Integration see the work of Eadaoin Bhreathnach and her series '*The Scared Gang*' published by Alder Tree Press.

For more information on other relational interventions that are helpful for troubled pupils please see the book –
Settling Troubled Pupils to Learn: Why Relationships Matter in School
co-authored by Louise Michelle Bomber and Dan Hughes.