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Self-control path to success

By Bethany Hiatt

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Parents who are exhausted after their daily struggles with two or three children often wonder how teachers can manage a class of 25 wriggly little humans for six hours a day, let alone teach them anything.

Dealing with disruptive students while keeping a lesson running smoothly for all children in a class is a skill that takes time to develop.

A recent Staff in Australia's Schools survey reveals almost half of new teachers said the on-the-job-training they most needed was in "dealing with difficult student behaviour".

But even the most experienced teachers will struggle when confronted by extreme behaviour, such as students throwing chairs at them or using scissors to threaten classmates.

Sadly, these sorts of extreme incidents occur far too often and appear to be on the rise.

Possible reasons include more dysfunctional families, children spending more time in front of screens than playing outside, poor diets and more students diagnosed with learning difficulties.

In the past, we've seen calls for schools to get tough on disruptive or aggressive students by suspending or expelling them more often, sending them off-site to behaviour centres or even bringing back corporal punishment.

But growing research evidence in recent years has led to a shift in schools towards finding other ways of dealing with the problem.

One possible solution is to intervene early and teach children how to control the way they respond to their own emotions while neural pathways are still forming in their brains.

This is reflected in a recent policy document setting out Education Department priorities for next year that includes specific reference to self-regulation .

In the Focus 2015 statement, released last week, director-general Sharyn O'Neill urges schools to "implement strategies to develop emotional regulation skills in young children" .

Ms O'Neill says developing emotional self-regulation in young children is essential to improving students' academic achievement and behaviour in the long term.

It means that instead of waiting until students are out of control teens in Years 9 or 10, schools should tackle the issue when they are in Years 1 or 2 by teaching them the skills they need to manage their own behaviour.

Canadian academic Stuart Shanker, a child development expert who has advised the WA Government, describes self-regulation as the effectiveness with which a child deals with stress and then recovers from the effort to return to a state of being calmly focused and alert.

Children unable to deal with all the stressors in their lives can appear inattentive, irritable, unresponsive, impulsive or aggressive.

Neuroscience research during the past decade has found that being exposed to traumatic experiences in their early years influences the way children's brains develop, depending on their age at the time.

The bodies of children who are constantly exposed to stressful situations — such as witnessing violence or abuse — release chemicals and hormones that disrupt their ability to remember things, making it more difficult for them to learn.

They also desensitise the brain's threat-detection centre so that children perceive a threat even when none exists.

Their arousal centre is perpetually left switched to the "on" button, and it takes only a little extra stress to trigger an explosion.

Basil Hanna, chief executive of Parkerville Children and Youth Care which provides outreach and early intervention services to schools, says the agency has seen an increase in the past five years in the number of children displaying extreme behaviour. He says teachers are dealing with far more complex situations than they did five years ago, with the same or less resources.

Behaviour that used to be seen in Years 9 and 10 was now displayed in Years 6 or 7.

"We believe that is a result of the increase in dysfunctional family life and the increase in domestic violence and abuse in home situations," he says.

"The real dilemma here is that you can't blame the child, because the child is suffering from the consequences of the trauma.

"And the teachers are in a no-win situation, because they're having to deal with these quite significant outbreaks of behaviour from these kids."

Edith Cowan University behaviour management lecturer Mandie Shean, a former teacher and school psychologist, says research shows that children who are traumatised or stressed have less working memory available for their school work.

So it could be counterproductive for teachers to add to that pressure by reprimanding students.

Dr Shean says the main concept she tries to instil in teachers is not to take students' bad behaviour personally, but to think about what might be causing the child to misbehave.

In an ideal world, schools would be able to concentrate on teaching children how to read, write, add up and think critically, leaving the emotional regulation sphere to parents.

But given that many parents who fail to take responsibility for their child's behaviour also struggle to manage their own emotions, then schools are best-placed to model those skills for students.

And hopefully this will also help them — and the teachers of the future — when they start having children of their own.

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