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Principles for Responding to Children in a Traumatic Time

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9. Principles for Responding to Children in a Traumatic Time

Sal Vascellaro

Before coming to Bank Street College as a graduate faculty member, student advisor, and consultant to public schools, SAL VASCELLARO was the head of the New Lincoln elementary school, corporate education manager for Manufacturers Hanover Corporation, and teacher of children ages three through ten in public and independent schools. He earned a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Teaching from Columbia University in 1999.

As a member of the group that worked on the 2002 NAEYC Pre-Conference Session, "Responding to Young Children in a Traumatic Time: Voices from the Broader Bank Street Community," I was assigned the daunting task of distilling the substance of the presentations into a list of principles. While the speakers focused on responding to the tragic events of September 11, our aim was to help educators in their struggle to respond to the range of traumatic experiences many children have to live with—the death of a loved one, serious illness, violence, drug addiction, homelessness. We wanted to give them something tangible to use as they respond to the children in their care.

As I listened to, read, and reread transcripts of the accounts given by Kate Delacorte, a director of the Downtown Little School, and Trish Lent, teacher at P.S. 234, I began to realize that everything I needed to say was embedded in their stories. Each related accounts of children, parents, teachers, and school administrators directly affected by the events of September 11. They are accounts of educators summoning all their inner resources to respond to the needs of children and families at a time when their own needs were just as strong. Most importantly, they are accounts of educators drawing from their own deep knowledge of sound educational practice. Each time I reread their stories, it became clearer to me that they had something important to say to all teachers about responding to children who experience traumatic events.

Principles

Be responsive to the children.

Observe and "listen" to what they are saying about themselves in their behavior, their art work, their play, as well as in their words.

Be honest with the children

While children do not need to know all the frightening details or the full complexity of the situation, you want to represent what has happened honestly. For example, some teachers tried to shield children by telling them that the September 11 attack was an accident, although most children already knew this was not the case. An environment of trust is based on honesty.

Acknowledge the children's feelings and help them express a wide range of emotions in appropriate ways.

Sound early childhood practice already has in place the vehicles for children to express their feelings and concerns: dramatic play; open-ended expressive materials, such as blocks, paint, clay, sand and water; a routine meeting time that invites children to discuss what is important to them and becomes a safe forum for joint problem solving.

Cultivate and draw from a sense of community.

Community is achieved through communication and a predictable routine, thereby offering a safe environment for children to share what is important to them.

Examine your own feelings and attitudes before addressing those of the children.

Although this is not a simple matter, it is an essential aspect of all teaching. However, it becomes especially critical when children experience traumatic events.

Allow yourself to address children's feelings and concerns.

Be forgiving of what you consider mistakes. You can only do your best. Remember that in most cases there are no perfect words or activities to “solve” the problem. Assume that addressing traumatic events is a process that requires time, reflection, and a variety of strategies to help the individuals in your class.

Work with colleagues.

Addressing difficult problems is too hard to do alone. Discuss your questions, feelings, and concerns with other teachers, administrators, and support professionals.

Work with parents

When considering how you can address this situation with the children, it is the parents who can tell us what the child's experience has been and how the child's routines have changed. Most frequently, parents are our only source for this information.

Parents may need our guidance about how to help their children through a time of crisis.

Parents' desire to protect their children may be so great that they keep important information from the children or give wrong information or do not answer the children's questions. A recommendation as simple as "Turn off the television" can make a difference. As a regular part of your program, discuss with parents the issue of addressing difficult situations with children, so that in times of stress, this can be built upon.

Remember that there is more to a child's world (and your own) than the trauma.

While keeping the door open to addressing the traumatic event, you can also offer other curriculum opportunities that affirm the children's safety, spark their imaginations, expand their world, and are simply fun.

Pay attention to your own needs and emotions. Replenish yourself.