

Appendix D: Teaching Moments

Explanation of Brain Functions:

The amygdala is a structure in the brain that acts as a “security guard” protecting us from threats. When a child is in an emotional state (stressed/anxious) the amygdala prevents information from going to the part of the brain responsible for higher level thinking and reasoned judgment. (26) When a child participates in activity they enjoy, “a brain break”, sharing a poem in two parts, listening to music, reading a book aloud, or coloring it allows the brain to return to an optimal state of learning. (Reference 27)

*Many people believe that a person is born either smart, average, or dumb – and stays that way for life. But, new research shows the brain is like a muscle. It changes and gets stronger when you use it. (9)

Understanding Anxieties/Worries/Emotions:

*Anxiety can contribute to sensory over responsiveness. This may cause a student to become overwhelmed by sights, sounds, taste, smells, textures, and movement. They may engage in behaviors such as hyper-vigilance, continuously scanning the environment, inattention, excessive movement and outbursts. (23)

* Teach students that worry is good. It helps them prepare for danger. Children need to know it is ok to worry. It is a healthy release emotion, but excessive worry can interfere with learning and the ability to access memory skills.

* Help students recognize his or her own signs of anxiety (heart pounding, sweating, stomach ache, shortness of breath, lack of energy, muscle tightness), as a warning that they are in need of a strategy. Developing self-awareness is the one of the first steps in recognizing the need to change one’s behavior.

Thinking Strategies:

* Thinking strategies are learning to change our thoughts and how we feel. One small positive thought can change a whole day. By setting our intention for the day, we can bring awareness to our ability to change our thoughts. By changing our thoughts, we can change our life experiences. Positive thinking is linked to both psychological and physiological benefits. One of those benefits is stress reduction. (20)

*Thinking strategies can help you to change how you think and what you do. It focuses on the “here and now” problems and difficulties. It’s not an event that causes our emotions, but how we interpret or give meaning to that event. (31)

* By listening to the things children say about themselves and their experiences, parents and teachers can learn to notice and gently challenge children’s unhelpful thinking. The best way to do this is to help children think through the reasons why they think a particular way. Saying things like, “I can see how you might think that, but maybe there’s another way of looking at it,” or “Let’s see how we can check that out,” are very useful for helping children change their unhelpful thinking. (16)

* Praise should deal not with the student’s personality attributes but with his/her efforts or achievements. Praise students for the growth-oriented process. What they accomplished through practice, study, persistence, and good strategies. Ask them about their work in a way that admires and appreciates their efforts and choices. (31)

Positive Affirmation:

*Positive affirmations are a way to replace the way one thinks. Positive new beliefs can be strengthened through repetition. Repeat affirmations a few times a day. Address one change in thought for a month and you will most likely see a difference in a child’s response to an anxiety-producing event. (23)

Classroom Environment/Home Environment:

*Be mindful of the culture of your classroom. Don't worry that children never listen to you; worry that they are always watching you. Robert Fulghmen (4) Is your classroom perceived as calming? Is the tone of your voice calm and relaxed? Emotion is contagious. Malcom Gladwell (4)

*A chaotic environment makes a child feel powerless. A child may have difficulty relaxing due to worrying about what will happen next. To be successful creative learners, compassionate, respectful, self-aware human beings, children must be given opportunities to draw their awareness away from our overwhelming chaotic world. (12)

Calming and Focusing:

*Whatever we practice grows stronger. Such as, if we practice anger and allow it to be a habit it can become our character. If we practice kindness, we can become a compassionate person. By being mindfully aware of these thoughts, we have the choice to choose to allow the thought to take over our mind and the way we react. (24)

*Pause. Listen. Breathe. It can take less than a minute to cue our minds to relax and focus. As children practice controlled breathing, their brains develop and reinforce the "habit" of responding when anxiety occurs. This leads to reflective rather than reactive response. Deep belly breathing gives the lungs more room to expand than chest breathing. Chest breathing tends to produce shallower breaths. (26)

* Do not try to relax your mind. Relax your body and your mind will follow. (23) Completing mindful activities teaches the student to live in the present moment. Teach them not to worry about what is going to happen next or dwell on past experiences.

Movement:

*Mood enhancing chemicals called endorphins are released into your blood stream during and after being physically active. The mood benefit of just 20 minutes of exercise/activity can last 12 hours according to researchers at the University of Vermont. (13) Research shows that exercise decreases stress/anxiety and improves test scores. (33)

*Mind body relaxation is for letting go, releasing tension, and negative thinking. Yoga, a form of mind body relaxation, has shown to significantly improve resilience, which is linked to successful coping with stress and adversity. (15)