

Introducing Trauma-Informed, Strengths-Based Classrooms

In this chapter, you will learn about:

- simple, complex, and developmental trauma
- the healing power of the classroom
- the value of trauma-informed, strengths-based classrooms.

Emily was a new teacher, fresh from a university teacher pre-service training course. She had earned a teaching position in a school located in a rapidly growing outer suburb and was allocated to a Grade 5 class for students who had developed a reputation for resisting their teachers. Emily started her first days of teaching filled with determination and optimism. However, she quickly found her university training to be insufficient when confronted with the substantial challenges she was experiencing in the classroom. Every day, Emily would face students who openly defied her, or gave up and walked out of class without permission. She was dealing continually with students who created social drama with their peers. Emily felt a sense of despair and hopelessness at some of the circumstances her students were living with. She often felt inadequate when confronted with the barriers to learning her students faced.

Emily was assigned a mentor, an extremely experienced senior teacher who had been at the school for a long time. Emily's mentor,

determined to help 'toughen up' the softly spoken Emily, shared strategies that felt uncomfortably authoritarian to her. All the advice Emily received from her mentor focused on the importance of maintaining firm boundaries through strict consequences. However, when Emily doled out all the consequences by 11am, and her students still showed signs of dysregulation, she intuitively knew she needed more strategies than simply threatening consequences.

The week before we first met her, Emily's mentor had made a comment: 'I am not sure if you're tough enough to stand up to these kids. You need to think about what it takes to be strong enough in front of these students.' The mentor implied, not so subtly, that Emily might be better suited to working with students who didn't have as many learning needs. Needless to say, Emily's confidence plummeted, her self-esteem was low, and she was beginning to question her lifelong dream of becoming a teacher and working towards social equity for students.

Emily found our team at Berry Street through her own hunt for teacher strategies. She enrolled in our training course with her principal's support. Emily was hooked from the moment she began learning about our strategies for building trauma-informed, strengths-based classrooms. Emily learned about the impact of trauma on young people's brains, emotions, behaviors, and learning capacities. Emily developed an interest in mindfulness and began to share mindfulness strategies with students in her classroom. She worked hard to implement classroom routines and rhythms that created a sense of safety and connectedness for her students. To start with, Emily's students resisted the changes she was trying to implement. She persisted, and her new practice began to take hold.

Now, Emily still experiences stressors and frustrations on many days; however, she strives for and celebrates the small wins that happen in her classroom every day. A small win in Emily's eyes may be a student grasping a complex skill for the first time, a student remaining on task for their goal of five minutes, or a student proactively regulating their emotions before they get to their usual point of blowing up. Emily's students know that, while she might not have the answers to address their escalated and strong behaviors, she will always treat them with respect and empathy. Her classroom is a place of humor and playfulness—and equally, of academic rigor and stories of learning success.

Previously, Emily felt overwhelmed by the difficulties and barriers to education her students experienced. Now she also sees genuine