**Caring for Students Exposed to Negative Peer Behavior**

By: CPI with Dr. Lori Desautels

<https://www.crisisprevention.com/Blog/Students-Exposed-to-Negative-Peer-Behavior>

We are seeing a significant increase in behavioral challenges from many of our students in this current school year. This can feel scary or dysregulating to the nervous systems of students who observe negative peer behavior (“bad” behavior, like aggression, defiance, eloping, or shut down responses). We often try to protect children and youth from these uncomfortable situations by simply not addressing them. But this can unintentionally create added anxiety because the unknown is met with a student’s personal interpretation of an outburst or a meltdown from a peer. Our brains predict experiences based on past experiences and we encounter a visceral sensory/brainstem response, which is usually a sensation experienced in our bodies when we see another struggling.

**Bodies, Brains, and Negative Peer Behavior**

If a child or youth hears someone yelling, a door slamming, a classmate sobbing, or tones of voices that sound harsh, their hearts begin beating fast, breathing becomes shallow, and they can feel tension and tightness in their bodies. These sensory signals occur immediately before we recognize how we are feeling or thinking. Emotions are contagious so other students in the room begin mirroring or picking up on the dysregulation of classmates and possibly the teacher or staff member.

Many students are currently carrying toxic levels of stress, which creates an altered stress response state that can trigger a survival response like yelling or aggression. The nervous system is designed to protect us, and our students need to know this.

When our nervous systems are operating on “high volume,” we can feel edgy, irritated, and our anger can explode with a perceived threat, or anything that feels unsafe, as we begin to defend ourselves. Adults and students alike can misinterpret this.

But when we take care of each other before a crisis, we are building cultures of felt safety.

Some people need glasses so they can see well. Many people need hearing aids for improved hearing. Crutches help us to walk when we are injured. When we feel lonely, many of us need connection. If we have a headache or body pain, we treat it with medicine, a trip to the doctor, or a cold compress. If we are exhausted, we sleep. If we have a cut or wound, we treat it with ointment, an antibiotic, and a covering.

When we are chronically anxious, sad, or angry, we can look normal on the outside, but our wounds or injuries are invisible. This is what we need to share with our students during morning or afternoon gatherings before we have eruptions.

Our students need to understand that most negative peer behavior is communicating pain that feels unmanageable inside the nervous system of a friend or classmate. Our students need to understand the neuroscience of how they feel and therefore how their bodies sometimes react when they are upset or see negative peer behavior.

Children and youth are resilient in their personal responses when adults are authentic and honest, explaining what lies beneath behaviors. We never have to share the personal conditions or experiences that a student is working through. But we do benefit when we have these open conversations with our classes in an environment that is calm and collaborative.

**Neuroplasticity is Our Human Superpower**

Neuroplasticity is our brain and nervous system’s ability to change with every experience we encounter. The more we practice this ritual of morning or afternoon discussions as a part of our routines, we begin to understand that behaviors are only the signals and we can respond with more ease taking care of our own nervous systems, no matter what is happening around us.

When we establish new routines, procedures, or ways of responding to an experience, the conditions begin to feel more controllable or adaptable.

Here are some suggestions for how we begin to cultivate intentional neuroplasticity with your students when negative peer behavior leaves them feeling fearful or confused.

When holding class meetings or convocations, take an opportunity to share how invisible pain is just as important to address as physical and visible injuries or wounds. This is a time when we teach our children and youth about the brain and the nervous system. We talk about how impossible it is to think clearly or learn, when we are feeling anxious, angry, or sad. We discuss behaviors as only “clues” or “signals” that cover up the deeper injury or wound. We share stories of times when we were feeling lonely, hurt, disconnected, or super angry. We discuss how our brain is always trying to protect us when we begin to feel rough or dysregulated. This is called a survival response and when we are in survival, we feel as if we are being chased by a bear. Below are a few resources that can help students of all ages better understand how their nervous system functions under stress.

Create community meetings at the beginning or end of the day so everyone can share how they are feeling in their nervous systems. We need to provide students ways to check in with their nervous systems and the templates below are great ways everyone can share how they are feeling.

Help students express their sensations, feelings, thoughts, strengths, and preferences. Journaling, drawing, or creating art are powerful ways to accomplish this. We can provide this opportunity as part of our routines and procedures as this feels predictable and safe and is always a choice.

Provide opportunities for students to step into leadership roles if the class encounters negative peer behavior. As we create these collaborative environments, we plan procedures that can help your students respond to disruptions caused by negative peer behavior. For example, Jane will oversee turning down the lights. Tyesha will pass out books or journals for students to read or write out their thoughts. Sy will turn on some soft rhythmic music and Tamara will relay to the office that our classroom may need some assistance. What other roles and responsibilities could we provide for our students when we have building chaos and confusion?

During morning or afternoon gatherings, have students create a menu of three or four “in the moment” practices they can begin to implement if they are feeling anxious or worried. Integrating these everyday gives students access sensations and practices that help them remain calm when they are in “rough waters.”

**Between Families Newsletter**
**Training Insert**
**Caring for Students Exposed to Negative Peer Behavior**
**March 2022**

**Name:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

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**PLEASE COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONAIRRE FOR ½ HOUR CREDIT AND SUBMIT TO YOUR ASSIGNED FOSTER CARE WORKER**

1. Protecting children from these uncomfortable situations by not addressing then can cause added \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ because the unknown is met with the students' interpretation of an outburst or meltdown from a peer.

2. (True/False) These sensory signals occur immediately before we recognize how we are feeling or thinking.

3. The nervous system is designed to do what?

A) keep stress in balance.

B) protect us.

C) communicate with other parts of our bodies.

D) None of these.

4. When we feel lonely, many of us need \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

5. (True/False) Our students need to understand that most negative peer behavior is communicating pain that feels unmanageable inside the nervous system of a friend or classmate.

6. (True/False) For older children, Twelve to eighteen is the critical period of adolescence in normal development where kids are trying to get more autonomy.

7. What is our human superpower?

A) how our brain functions.

B) reading minds.

C) neuroplasticity.

D) All the above.

8. (True/False) When we do not establish new routines, procedures, or ways of responding to an experience, the conditions begin to feel more controllable or adaptable.

9. Which is NOT a suggestion to cultivate intentional neuroplasticity?

 A) show how invisible pain is important.

B) discuss behaviors as clues or signals.

C) address the behavior as it comes.

D) how the brain is always trying to protect us.

10. Provide opportunities for students to step into \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ roles if the class encounters negative peer behavior.