

## SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN WORKING WITH CHILDREN WHO ARE HAVING OUTBURSTS IN THE CLASSROOM.

The information below is a summary created from several articles and webinars I have read and attended relating to handling “outbursts”, (actually “disregulation”) in children in a classroom. For the most part we see this in younger students, particularly PreK students who have not yet developed self-regulation skills and habits; however, this can continue to occur in some forms with individuals who have been diagnosed with neurodiverse conditions which may not include those on the autism spectrum.

The issue for many neurodiverse individuals is often related to various sensory processing difficulties. These individuals are unable or have a great deal of difficulty in effectively processing various sensory stimuli. This results in sensory overload which precipitates a flight or fright syndrome type response. The overload can build if there is an attempt to intervene to try and bring about regulation but with the incorrect calming strategy. This is often the result of either not recognizing the triggers that bring about the onset of the sensory overload, or the person attempting to bring about the regulation through choosing the wrong strategy for the sense that is being overloaded.

So to start with, it is important to gather both observational data and parental data about a child who may be exhibiting frequent disregulation. Please remember that all of us when we were little didn't have developed self-regulation and this could lead to meltdowns and outbursts. This doesn't mean we have persistent issues or even neurodiversity, it simply means that we don't have a fully developed self-regulation set of skills and neurological development in our brains to be able to manage challenging or threatening situations, which can easily overwhelm us. So don't start by assuming that all children in your classroom that may have a meltdown or a disruptive outburst are students that need a specialized approach to calming down. There are general calming

activities that can be applied to all students in the classroom, and I will share some of those as well.

So as I mentioned the first thing we want to do is to gather information on potential triggers for students who have persistent issues with dysregulation. We also want to gather information on how these students display their dysregulation, and what if any techniques are the parents using successfully at home to manage these issues and what things have proven ineffective so far. Once we have that basic information we can then gather additional information via our own observations.

The first things to look for are environmental elements in the classroom that may be contributing. Such things as loud noises that go on for several minutes, strong odors that may linger in the room, excessive random activity by many students at the same time, sudden unexpected transitions from one activity to another, entering a new and unfamiliar environment with new and unfamiliar people, too much bright light in the classroom or significant amounts of fluorescent lighting, excessive amounts of clutter on the floor, constantly changing seating arrangements, significant shifts in daily or weekly routines, student fatigue, hunger, thirst, need to use the bathroom frequently, and this list could go on. I have mentioned previously in other communications that have unstructured play while this may give the child freedom to choose what to play with and whom to play with, is not necessarily a good thing in the confined space of the classroom. It is much better adapted for the larger outdoor spaces. Having specific play stations, and structuring the play activity so that it includes station assignments for the students, specific time limits for play at each station, and specific play tasks at each station is a far better way to manage play time activities in the classroom and much better for neurodiverse children. While this might not seem like much play time, keep in mind that when you were learning how to play board games you had to be seated at a specific location, follow specific rules for the game, and interact with your fellow players in specific ways. These habits actually were part of your formation of self-regulation,

because if you wanted to play the game effectively you needed to bring yourself into regulation with those parameters. Another important tool for play time is having some specific physical exercise or yoga activity set that the students participate in with teacher leadership. There are actually specific yoga poses that are used for calming students who are experiencing meltdowns in the classroom. The exercised shouldn't be something that tires out the student, but provides the necessary physical stimulation of the heart, muscles, and brain that are required for optimal learning in the classroom. The idea of sitting students at desks for long periods of time, more than 15 to 20 minutes at a time for preschool students is an outdated 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century tool that was unfortunately carried over into the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries and has done a grave disservice to student learning in this country.

Since sounds can be a definite trigger, try to carefully consider the sound levels in your classroom. I actually have a sound meter app on my phone that measures decibel levels in the classroom. I have used this to help teachers look at how much noise there is and begin to look at ways to reduce that. In some cases it is simply finding activities where the students practice short periods of time without talking or making other noise, to using soft background music to help provide a more calming atmosphere. For those of you who aren't a fan, soft classical music has been shown through research to actually aid brain function in learning environments. Some neurodiverse students may also benefit from noise canceling headphones or ear loops to help them manage excessive noise in the classroom. Singing, quiet clapping, and or tapping can be useful in helping prepare students for transitions when done consistently.

Providing fidget toys or bounce seating can help neurodiverse children that have difficulty sitting and need ongoing physical stimulation to actually remain calm and focused. Banning fidget toys in the classroom has been a huge mistake among educators. So as not to discriminate against students who don't need these, having a basket with those in so

students can choose to use them or not is helpful. Also having squeeze toys can help with calming some children.

Providing a quiet place for students to go such as a large colorfully decorated cardboard box, or a makeshift blanket tent in a corner of the classroom that is filled with soft pillows, some stuffed animals, and maybe even some duplos or small cars and trucks, can be a good place for students who are experiencing the stress of a meltdown can go and/also begin to allow them to choose this on their own which is part of helping them learn self-regulation. While this means they may miss some of the academic materials you may be trying to teach, try to remember that these are young children developing at all different rates, and maybe at this point in their lives learning some basic self-regulation is more important than learning their ABC's or Numbers etc. Some students may benefit from using a weighted blanket but this should only be used with teacher supervision.

Using outdoor activities where students can learn to sit or stand and observe nature, listen for specific nature sounds, learn to identify specific elements of nature and appreciate being in the fresh air is also important along with outdoor play. Learning basic breathing exercises can help with calming and all students can participate in learning these as well. Remember however, when outside on a very sunny day, that bright light can be a trigger for some children and they should have sunglasses, or a hat to help minimize that trigger. Simple scavenger hunts are a good activity as well.

Having plants in the classroom may create a more calming environment, and/having the students participate in the growing and care of those plants may also be helpful. Having a fish tank in the classroom has also proved effective, because it can create a calming element in the environment that the student can focus on if they are beginning to feel overwhelmed by something else in the environment, and again having a classroom pet is

also often helpful if it is one that doesn't have a potential to hurt the child. That is why a small fish bowl or tank, or a small bowl for a turtle can be more useful than other types of pets. For some students who have severe difficulties in calming and self-regulation they may need what we now coming refer to as a service dog to help provide that calming. We know from extensive research with PTSD patients that this is a very effective tool in helping them remain calm. While I am not advocating for bringing dogs to the classroom, only trained service animals should be allowed. One of the things that Dolores has done for years that has been extremely effective has been raising chicks, and the other I have done is using the Aerogardens with the students. These can be used year round and can take the place of other plants in the classroom. The gentle water circulation in those units makes a comforting sound as well.

Using circle time or read aloud time for calming activities can be helpful as well. Allowing the students to sit on a comfortable cushion or with a blanket during story time or when watching an educational video or show is also a possibility. For some students a simple game like seated "Simon Says", or a guessing game using cue cards or something from the story can be a good tool as well.

With regard to transitions, having some simply Cue Cards that have a picture related to the transition can also help prepare the students along with any verbal directions you might be giving, or a transition song you might be using. Waiting time practice is a good prep for transitions, like when you are trying to have the students line up. You can have them all stand where they are for 10 seconds or have them all wait by their table or desk until you call them into the line one at a time. While in the line you can give them a simple counting activity or have them sing a simple preparation song like "Ready Set Go" that you can find on YouTube and teach them that while you wait for the others to get in line. I have also used actual timers with students to help them get a better idea of waiting time. Sometimes I have used real physical timers and other times I have used

digital display timers on a smart board or projector screen. You can also try a simple teacher lead activity like wait for my 10 fingers to lift, and then you hold up your hands and slowly lift each finger. Another thing you might try is a simple Stretch and Bend activity while students are lining up. Have them stretch up high then bend down to touch their toes.

I haven't said much about smells as a trigger here, but remember that students bringing snacks or lunches to school might have something in those snacks or lunches that can produce smells that might be a trigger for some students. You can't do much about this except move a student away from any strong order. Likewise please remember that in this environment you don't need to wear a lot of perfume or lotions that might produce strong smells. If you are using those, please use them in moderation, and if a student seems to be having a specific reaction, consider not using those things when you are at work. When having parties in the classroom, remember this can be an issue as well. Also remember that food allergies can trigger dysregulation as well so be very aware of students who may have sensitivities to various types of food or beverage items.

Some other very important tips:

1. Co-Regulation – You need to maintain your calm if you want the student to calm down. Shouting, physically grabbing the student is not going to de-escalate the situation. Remember your triggers as well and try to be sensitive to them so you can give yourself time to self-regulate if needed especially when you have an aide in the classroom.
2. Model how you want the children to behave when something is upsetting them. Teach them how to do calming things, make sure that they are being safe and not impacting others, and help them to focus so that they can reintegrate and begin to regulate their behavior. Help them to recognize things that might be triggers for them.

3. Allow students who use personal stimming as a way of managing stress to do this and if this is upsetting to other students find a safe place for the student who needs to do this to have a few minutes to use this self-stimulation technique to calm themselves.
4. While we may think that hugging is a good calming tool, it is not always the case since some students have sensory issues with touch. For those issues, please be aware of how that may impact the student and try to avoid touch with those students, or ask first if it might be alright for you to touch them gently.
5. I haven't said much about temperature being a trigger, but for some students who may have hypothalamus disorders, sudden changes in temperature or too hot or too cool and environment may be very much a trigger for dysregulation. Try to adjust temperatures in the classroom to a normal range for the season of the year, and if need be allow students to wear a jacket or sweater if too cool, or remove a jacket or sweater if they are too warm. Make sure they are appropriately dressed for the outdoors, but remember that some children who have higher normal body temperatures or who have significant body mass might not require as much clothing for outdoor activities.
6. Remember to give positive reinforcement for the student when they are able to reach a calm state, and in many cases give the student positive reinforcement while they are trying to participate in the calming activities you are using even if they haven't achieved a calm state yet. Helping them feel like they are moving in the right direction is just as important as when they actually get there.
7. Finally we all need to be aware that there are other issues which may be a part of the triggering mechanisms that aren't as easy to detect. Kinesthetic issues involve students having difficulty with body positioning, they may appear exceptionally clumsy but this may actually be caused by kinesthetic issues in the brain. Also proprioceptive issues such as vestibular imbalance can be issues as well. We can't see the inner ear disturbances but these may make the student feel very dizzy or even nauseous even when suddenly rising from a chair or from sitting on the floor. These can also trigger meltdowns. These obviously have to be addressed by medical personnel and are not

something we can deal with in the classroom other than to recognize that the child is not having what we might feel is a willful meltdown. In these cases the only thing we may be able to do, is to try to get the child into a safe seated or lying down position until the physical disturbance passes.

I have recently seen some new materials on using drama and simply plays type activities as calming activities as well. Finger puppet plays work well with young children, but also having children act out simple picture book stories can be effective as well.

One thing I haven't mentioned that I want to include here is the impact of digital tool involvement.

Too much screen time can be a definite trigger for a meltdown. We know that this can have both an impact of visual stimulation as well as attention and focus and other brain integration activities. This is why the American Pediatric Association recommends no more than 10 minutes of screen time for children ages 2 to four and no more than fifteen minutes for children 5 to 7 years of age. We all know however that children are frequently spending considerably more time than that on digital devices. In our classrooms it is important to try to limit this. If we are using the device as a calming tool, and it can be used in that way, please try to keep the length of time within these guidelines, and have a secondary calming technique available when that screen time is up. One digital device that has proven to be a help in this area that can be used for a longer period of time is what we would term a "Service Robot" this are robotic toys that allow the children to interact with them in some way. With the increase use of AI some of these current toys will become much more sophisticated in their interactions with children. Hopefully we will not see adverse interactions as we have with some forms of AI. For the moment most of these robots are not yet equipped with AI and have relatively limited programming, but some of those that use dance movements or simple chat responses seem to have a positive calming effect with some children.



There is a lot more I could say here and many more resources that I have come across but I believe this is a good starting point and I hope it will be helpful. If you have further questions, please feel free to speak with me.