

Kathryn Berkett - Answers to Hui Questions

All of my answers are very simplified. Writing is not my expertise, I prefer to talk about these things. So please respect that I have done my best to answer in the most succinct way, but of course there is so much more complexity to every single one of these questions.

Thanks so much for submitting them. I am sorry we didn't get to all of them on the day. All the best and keep doing the amazing mahi you all do every day!

How do you help support children with intellectual disabilities to self regulate?

Firstly we need to recognise that sometimes there are damages to the brain cells that can impact ability to do certain tasks. If we were born without physical legs, we would see that, and therefore align our expectations with what the person is physically capable of. We would help that person learn to compensate for their lack of legs. Often this recognition will lead to them being able to lead a very fulfilling life. This wouldn't happen if we expected them to walk, despite not having legs. This would lead to a lack of self worth and likely on to behavioural issues.

With the brain cells, we usually can't see any lack of cells, if there is any lack. So we often assume this person is not following instructions or doing a certain task because they are somehow choosing to disobey or be naughty. If we see it in the context where they need help compensating, rather than assuming they can do it, then we get into the space of more respectful practice.

So if we start from a space of respect and getting to know the individual. Creating safety first. Then we help them learn to regulate their own system to the level they are capable of, not expecting anything too much above their capacity, then that will work.

If they are in a safe space, and consistently still find it hard to self-regulate, then that could indicate they may find that level of self-regulation very difficult or even not possible. Constant checking in is essential and respectful.

What do we do when a child with severe trauma cannot cope with mainstream school? They have the right to learn.

Absolutely they have the right to learn. The UNCROC states every child has the right to education. When we put learning in the context of Red/Green Brain, we know that learning is never going to happen until the Red Brain can scan and signal safety with the people and the environment around them. So for someone with severe trauma, it is incredibly unlikely they will ever find safety in a space with multiple variables. Schools are full of variable, people, spaces, timetables, etc etc. So if we were to respect the UNCROC, we would create spaces where these students are first made to feel safe, then worry about the academic side of things.

I have often seen schools (who have the capacity, which is not many schools TBH) having these students with a small number of teacher aides (one or two usually) keeping them in places like the library, or other spaces where they can do 'serve and return' relational creation. Then, when the student becomes ready, transitioning to more variable spaces. This can be a hugely long transition, but done properly, can be incredibly effective. Donal Mclean from Fruitvale School is a great example of this.

The current MOE reinforcement of ABA, resulting in psych interventions and responses being ABA focussed, doesn't fit with trauma informed 'connection over compliance' approach. How can we meet in the middle?

Great observation. Thanks! We do it by recognising the individual involved. If they have the capacity to regulate well, then ABA principles can work well, but even then only if they are done respectfully and are tailored to the individual, rather than a cookie-cutter exercise. However, if a young person is highly dysregulated, their Red Brain is over activated towards survival and danger, then we cannot use ABA. If we empowered educators to be able to select more individualised interventions rather than prescribing a 'one size fits all' approach, that would help us meet the needs of each individual.

How to support teachers develop a trauma informed lens.

Book studies with Dr Perry Books, or similar. Show them that it works. Using the 'How Often, How Long' assessment when we are allowing our young people to regulate via leaving classrooms or doing more relational/sensory/rhythmic activities. If we keep allowing them to do these regulatory behaviours, the negative behaviour will usually reduce, so we can use this as proof that trauma informed approaches are more likely to create change than our traditional reward and punishment beliefs.

How does Epigenetics and Genetics influence trauma?

This question is too big to answer here. It is too complex to simplify, and would likely be slightly offensive if I tried to simplify it too much. I will be doing my 'Intergenerational' workshop at the conference on 9th Sept in Akl which will cover this. Otherwise, look out for other occasions.

As educators, what are the indicators we should be looking for, and what are the ways to address this?

The indicators in the moment are the changes of body – so the things I described. Eyes dilating, dry mouth, sore stomach, heart rate increase etc. If we are looking at indicators over time, then we are looking at their general ability to stay focussed, their physical health and their sense of safety across multiple situations.

How we address it, is to create a sense of safety for them, fully dependent on that individual and what makes them safe. Then the resilience practice of multiple moments of tolerable stress, again being respectful of their individual space and capacity.

How does one deal with re-wiring thinking when anxiety and autism are in play?

Again, coming back to the respect of the individual and seeing them for who they are, rather than implementing something because of their chronological age. Someone who has autism has likely had more activations of their stress response along their developmental journey. This means we need to adjust the 'weight' of emotion to their specific ability. Their 'weight' maybe be less than others around them, but if we get that right and activate tolerable moments of stress, we can still help those young people re-wire appropriately.

"How do you keep the community / environment safe, calm orderly while connecting with possibly a large number of trauma affected students?"

I know I am sounding like a record on repeat, but we have to start with one-on-one, or small group situations for those who are dysregulated. I realise this is resource heavy, but if we want to keep them and ourselves safe, we need to start with connection, safety, predictability, routine etc. It is through expecting non-regulated individuals to cope and adhere to the social expectations of the regulated, that we get issues.