



Center for Early Education and Development

Tip Sheets

Relationship-Based Teaching with Young Children

Therapeutic Language

What is therapeutic language?

Therapeutic language sets the emotional tone in the classroom and helps children clarify and connect to their own thoughts and feelings. Therapeutic language can seem subtle at first and may be difficult to notice, but teachers who employ this language while teaching are consciously phrasing their interactions with children to nurture and stimulate social and emotional growth.

Who would benefit from therapeutic language?

Therapeutic language can be used with all children but it is particularly useful with children who are highly stressed having experienced abuse, trauma, and/or neglect. These children often engage in challenging behaviors that stem from the disruptions in their lives. Teachers can use this language to help children explore their emotions and help them to define the feelings they may be having.

Examples

Individual Child

The first example is set in a preschool classroom specifically designed for children who have been neglected or abused. It is the end of the day and David begins to throw toys. The rest of the day has gone very well and the teacher uses her background knowledge about David's home life to speculate that he may be feeling anxious about going home.

Teacher: "David, do you want to go home or do you want to stay at school?"

David (angrily): "I want to stay here!"

Teacher: "Oh! You want to stay at school!"

David: "I don't want to go home!"

Teacher: "No, you don't want to go home. You want to stay at school! Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could stay at school all the time and have dinner at school and sleep at school! We would need lots of beds."

David: "We need bunk beds!"

Teacher: "We would need so many bunk beds. Can I hold your hand and be on your team when we walk to the bus?"

David nods and takes his teacher's hand.



Discussion

In this example, the teacher has a choice of how to react to David throwing toys. She could focus only on David's behavior and reprimand him for throwing the toys or she can focus on the underlying emotional reason for David's behavior and help him to work through his feelings. By helping David to define his feelings, the teacher turns this into a learning opportunity for David. She teaches him to verbalize his fear about going home and she demonstrates to him that she can be trusted with his feelings. Being understood by his teacher allows David to calm, feel supported, and make the transition safely to his bus.

Group Instruction

It is important as we teach to be intentional in our use of language and to use questions and responses in an open-ended manner that allow children to express more than rote answers or simple yes/no responses. The following are examples of how common teacher comments and questions can be rephrased to have a more therapeutic intent.



Situation	Traditional Response	Therapeutic Response
Samuel intentionally hurts Donna.	"No, Samuel! That's not nice! Why did you do that?"	"No hitting, Samuel. If you're angry at Donna, use words."
Several children playing in the sandbox have arranged various colored cups in one corner of the box.	"Oh look! What color cups did you use for your design?" Children's response: "Red, blue, yellow..."	"Oh look! You put all different color cups together in the corner." Children's response: "That's the fort. Now the bad guys can't come in."
One child is left waiting for her bus at the end of the morning. The teacher is waiting with her. The child says, "I'm not coming to school tomorrow!"	"Sure you are! Tomorrow is only Wednesday! Do you know what day comes after Wednesday?"	"Maybe you're worried about being left in school, because it's taking the bus a long time to come."
Children are taking small dolls from the dollhouse and putting them into the back of a play garbage truck.	"Why are you putting those babies in the garbage truck? Don't you want them in the house and you can cook them a nice dinner?"	"Oh no! The babies are getting thrown into the garbage! Maybe they're crying?"

Discussion

Notice in the therapeutic responses the focus of the language is on the underlying emotions behind the situation. It either helps the child to identify their own emotions or to recognize and empathize with the emotions of others around them.

Reference:

Reference: Koplou, L. (1996). *Unsmiling faces: How preschools can heal*. New York: Columbia University.

For additional information on this topic, please visit CEED's web site at <http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed>.

Preparation of these materials was funded by IDEA, Part B, sec. 619, Preschool, through the Minnesota Department of Education. The information contained in these materials do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of the US Department of Education or the Minnesota Department of Education. This Tip Sheet was authored by Julie Nelson of Lifetrack Resources and compiled by Mary Nienow of the Center for Early Education and Development.

**COLLEGE OF EDUCATION
+ HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Copyright © 2009 by Center for Early Education and Development

These materials may be freely reproduced for education/training or related activities. There is no requirement to obtain special permission for such uses. We do, however, ask that the following citation appear on all reproductions:

Reprinted with permission of the Center for Early Education and Development (CEED), College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota, 1954 Buford Avenue, Suite 425, St. Paul, Minnesota, 55108; phone: 612-625-3058; fax: 612-625-2093; e-mail: ceed@umn.edu; web site: <http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed>.