

The Difference Between Social Emotional Curriculum and Trauma-Informed, Responsive and Healing Engaged Curriculum



What is the difference between a social emotional curriculum and a trauma informed, responsive and healing engaged curriculum? Why do teachers need both?

Trauma is so prevalent that addressing social-emotional skills is not enough. 50% of children in the United States under the age of six have experienced trauma. By the time children reach 18 years old, 67% of them have been impacted by trauma (Adverse Childhood Experiences Study). Understanding and addressing the neurobiology of trauma is the essential missing piece to creating healing engaged environments.

Social emotional curriculums are reliant on children having executive functioning skills. Children must be able to access their prefrontal cortex (executive brain) in order to identify feelings, build friendship skills, identify, and express emotions and to learn to regulate. Children who have been through trauma have had a constant release of toxic stress chemicals in their body. Their brain and body have been rewired to be on constant alert, hypervigilant and living in their 'survival brain' all day. When you are in your survival brain, you are living in a place called fight flight freeze, a place of terror and basic survival (feeling and perceiving you are unsafe). This "survival" required all the energy of the child to be put in to scanning the environment in a hypervigilant state in order to protect themselves from further danger (even when there is no real danger). When this happens, a child loses access to 90% of their executive brain functioning (thinking, reasoning, listening, planning, problem-solving, focal attention). Therefore, many children who've experienced trauma have delays in development. They cannot access the executive part of their brain which is required to listen, learn and focus in school. They will not be able to learn the executive functioning dependent social-emotional skills until they feel safe.

Trauma-informed, responsive, and healing engaged programs learn strategies that start from the bottom of the brain (survival brain). A child's brain and body will heal when we intentionally and actively plan to create a sense of safety relationally and in the environment. When children feel safe and their activated stress response system has been rewired to be more regulated, **then and only then** will they be able to access the executive parts of their brain where they can think, focus, follow instructions, remember things, learn expectations and recall the schedule of the day. Teachers will be able to expand their social-emotional curriculum and be more effective with **all children** when they learn trauma responsive strategies. Learning about the neurobiology of trauma is an essential complement to your social-emotional curriculum,

You may not know the history of the child's trauma, but when we observe persistent challenging behaviors, it may be a sign that we need to add additional supports to our toolbox. We need to learn trauma responsive strategies that will help all teachers help children rewire their brain to safety. The brain heals from the bottom up (safety), not the top down (teaching skills). That means simply that teaching skills (top of the brain skill) can never happen until the downstairs brain (hindbrain) is rewired developmentally to feel safe.

Children between the ages of 0-6 are building 1 million new neural connections a second (Harvard University). For those children experiencing trauma in their home or toxic stress, well trained and supported educators can rewire a child's brain through nurturing, responsive, caregiving, and safe predictable environments.

If you want to learn more about trauma, responsive and healing, engaged strategies, visit our website at www.optimalbrainintegration.com.