

Trauma and Toxic Stress: Creating a Safe Space in the Classroom

All student names changed for privacy.



“Ms. Kline, you’ll never guess what happened last night! The police came to my house!”. Smiling, my kindergarten student grabs my hand and took me to his seat. He had quite the story and he wanted the full audience of his desk mates. He riveted them with the tale of giant, kind men in blue uniforms who came to his house and let him play in their police cars. What he couldn’t say, didn’t know, is that they were there to investigate his teenage brother who was accused of threatening to set a bomb off in his high school down the road.

He didn’t know now, but he would soon enough. Jenny knows that a visit from the police is not a good sign, her mom and dad have both been to jail. Later this year, they would come back without warning and take her to a foster home. Derek’s mom is in and out of jail so he is living with his grandparents and cries through most school days. Truly, I could go on and on about the horrible things that my students had to go through.

It’s a kindergarten class, but the amount of trauma in it is astounding beyond their five years of life. As a teacher, it’s easy to feel helpless in a class like this. After all, you can’t take all your students home and keep them safe. What you can do is create a place for them to be safe at school.

During professional development given by Waterford School District on Trauma and Toxic Stress, I learned about the importance of just a space. They described somewhere where students can go to calm down when they feel overwhelmed. I was inspired to create a corner of

my classroom called “In the Clouds”. If you feel like you’re floating away, can’t think, can’t process, then you can go “In the Clouds” to calm down.

In this space, this tiny little desk shoved in a corner, there are breathing exercises that have been taught to the whole class. “Bubble breathing” helps you to gain control of your breath and emotions. You can identify how your feeling using the chart posted on the wall. If you can identify how you feel, it’s much easier to communicate. There is also a friendly owl to cuddle, a relaxing lava lamp style water bottle, and blank faces for you to draw how you feel. Anyone can go, for any length of time, and any reason. Later, I added a card, red on one side, green on the other. If they put the red side up, they didn’t want to talk about it. Green side up, they wanted to communicate how they were feeling. The important thing was that it was their choice. I never saw a red card.

In the beginning, I thought this would be a complete failure. I thought that if I gave this to students, they would just go there when they didn’t feel like working and goof off. To my surprise, this was never the case. Derek made it through an entire day without crying, then another and another. I learned that sweet, quiet Sarah doesn’t eat enough breakfast in the morning and she can’t focus. My mentor told her to sneak food home to her siblings from the extra snack box. Most kids spent no more than ten minutes at this station and could effectively calm down and get their work done.

It took me an hour to put together our tiny little desk in a corner. It saved a lot of students so much time in processing their traumas in ways that were hurting them in the classroom. It’s not a magic wand that you can wave and everything is OK. I do believe though that it is essential in the trauma-informed classroom.