Social-Emotional Well-Being in the Post-Covid World:

Addressing the Needs of Individuals with Learning Disabilities

International Dyslexia Association Tri-Counties Branch
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Outcomes

Participants will be able to:

- Understand common social, emotional, psychological and academic issues related to the pandemic.
- Utilize intervention techniques to address social, emotional and psychological needs of students with and without learning differences in a post-pandemic world.

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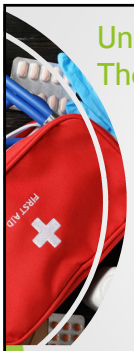
Understanding the Full Picture: The Covid-19 Pandemic



- January 30, 2020: World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 *a Public Health Emergency of International Concern.*
- March 11, 2020: WHO declared Covid-19 a Global Pandemic
- Universal collective slow-motion trauma
  - Not individual, family, small group, or community
  - Worldwide
  - Late 2019-present
  - Illness/Hospitalization/Death
  - Lockdown
  - Masks
  - Social distancing
  - Fear

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Some Results

- Confusion/unclear messaging
- Job loss
- Economic hardship
- Ill family members and friends
- Fear of potential illness
- Increased domestic violence
- Childcare concerns
- Working from home
- Distance learning
- Varied levels of preparedness
- Increased identification of students with learning differences
- Increased mental health issues

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General Impact

- Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development study (2020):
  - Missed learning opportunities will, "result in a long-term, if not life-long, disadvantage for the generation of K-12 students who experienced the pandemic."
- Various Studies
  - impact of a full year of learning loss estimated it as a 7.7% decline in discounted GDP (Hanushek & Woessman, 2020).
  - $10 trillion dollars in lost earnings over time for the current generation of students (World Bank, 2020)
- UNESCO(2022): 21,063 students, 15,004 teachers, 1,581 principals in 11 countries
  - Consistency across countries and cultures

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What is Trauma?

Oxford English Dictionary App:

- a deeply distressing or disturbing experience." a personal trauma like the death of a child"
- emotional shock following a stressful event or a physical injury, which may be associated with physical shock and sometimes leads to long-term neurosis.
- *synonyms: shock, upheaval, distress, stress, strain, pain, anguish, suffering, torment, agony, misery, heartbreak, wretchedness, affliction, woe, excruciation.*

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Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders 5-TR (DSM 5-TR)

Exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence in one (or more) of the following ways:

- Directly experiencing the traumatic event(s)
- Witnessing, in person, the event (s) as it occurred to others
- Learning that the traumatic event (s) occurred to a close family member or friend
- Experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of the traumatic event (s).

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Symptoms of Trauma: Intrusive Memories

- Recurrent, unwanted distressing memories of the traumatic event
- Reliving the traumatic event as if it were happening again
- Upsetting dreams or nightmares about the traumatic event
- Dreams or nightmares about the traumatic event
- Severe emotional distress or physical reactions to something that reminds a person of the traumatic event

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Symptoms of Trauma: Avoidance

- Trying to avoid thinking or talking about the traumatic event
- Avoiding places, activities or people that remind a person of the traumatic event.

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Symptoms of Trauma: Negative Changes in Thinking or Mood

- Negative thoughts about self or others
- Hopelessness about the future
- Memory problems
- Difficulty maintaining close relationships
- Feeling detached from family and friends
- Lak of interest in previously enjoyed activities
- Difficulty experiencing positive emotions
- Feeling emotionally numb

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Symptoms of Trauma: Changes in Physical or Emotional Reactions

- Easily startled or frightened
- Always being on guard for danger
- Self-destructive behaviors
- Trouble sleeping
- Trouble concentrating
- Irritability, angry outbursts or aggressive behavior
- Feelings of guilt or shame

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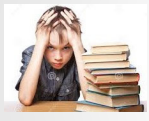
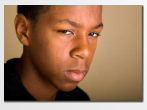
How Has This Universal Slow-Motion Trauma Impacted Our Students?

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Our Children are Experiencing Multiple Symptoms Associated With Trauma.

Poor Sleep

Weak Academics

Behavior problems

Withdrawal

Distractibility

Depression

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To solve the problem, we must look at the full picture

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Academic issues

- Lockdowns result in an average of 66 percent of the learning gains in reading and 44 percent of the learning gains in math, relative to the gains for a typical school year. (Brown University, 2021)
- The evidence shows that schools do not naturally bounce back: Affected students recovered 20-30% of the lost ground in the first year, but then made no further recovery in the subsequent 3-4 years. (Harvard, 2023)
- The gap in achievement levels between the pre and post-covid students did not shrink in 2022-23, and in some grades widened slightly.
- The average student will need the equivalent of 4.1 additional months of schooling to catch up in reading and 4.5 months in math (Lewis, 2023)
- Initially, younger students showed greater increase in below grade level performance than older students. (Kwakye, 2022), but this changed in 2023
- Initially, deficit greater in math than reading or writing, but this has also changed in 2023

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Academic continued

- Multiple studies indicate that the effects more severe for traditionally underserved students, such as students of lower SES, Black and Hispanic students, and students with learning differences (Huck 2021, Kwakye 2021, Reimers 2022, UNESCO 2022)
- Comparing across race/ethnicity groups, achievement gains for all students lagged pre-pandemic trends in 2022-23. Marginalized students remain the furthest from recovery. (Lewis, 2023) (Harvard, 2023)
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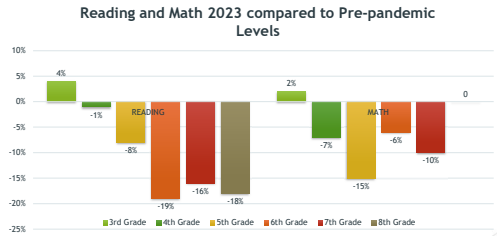
Achievement Gap Widens



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Experts' Suggestions to Address the Problem:

- Intensive tutoring
- Summer programs
- Class size reduction
- Extended school day
- Increase funding

There is nothing wrong with these suggestions, but they are not enough!

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Some Reasons Why These Ideas Are Not Enough

- Comparing post-pandemic test scores to pre-pandemic test scores is an inaccurate measure.
- Academic, developmental, social and emotional milestones and expectations are no longer valid.
- For students with Dyslexia and other Learning Differences, more is not the answer; different is the answer.
- None of these suggestions addresses the whole child or the experience they have all gone through that is like no other in recent history.
- We must go beyond academics to help our students.

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Mental Health Issues

- Incident rates of anxiety, depression, and psychological distress more than doubled during the period of 2020-2022. (Khubchandani, 2022)
- Approximately 42% of the world population is experiencing long term negative effects such as:
  - Stress, depression, anxiety, feelings of panic, hopelessness, or desperation, frustration, insomnia, irritability, emotional exhaustion, grief, low self-esteem, and traumatic stress symptoms. (Turmaud, 2020)
- Suicidality increased significantly, approximately 2% per year, between 2019 and 2021 amongst 12-17-year-olds. (Yard, et al, 2021)
- During the 2022-2023 School Year (Rave, 2022)
  - 61% of teachers report student mental health is #1 concern
  - 41% reported bullying and cyberbullying as a major concern
  - Physical assaults on campus up 14%

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Developmental Issues

- Brain development issues associated with Covid-19 pandemic stress (George et al, 2021)
  - Chronic stress can harm the brain can have long term effects and lead to increased anxiety, depression, and psychopathology
  - Damage to the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (HPA) can lower immune response and harm cognitive processing, resulting in both physical and mental health
  - Changes in pre-frontal cortex and hippocampus development
    - Associated with executive function, focus, emotion and mood needed for academic pursuits
    - Stress leads to dysregulation, memory loss, poor focus, and can lead to negative behaviors, school failure, and poor long-term outcomes.
- Anecdotal Autism/ADHD discussion

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Social Emotional Issues

- Isolation and loss of connection with family and friends during pandemic.
- Death of family member or friends
- For many students, school is the primary location of social and emotional connection, interaction, and support. (Huck 2021)
- Crucial developmental stages such as middle school and K-2 were missed for some students.
  - Missing social cues
  - Language development
  - Immaturity

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Teachers and Researchers Report:

- An increased number of students demonstrating behaviors congruent with trauma
- Distractibility/lack of concentration
- Poor memory
- Poor organizational skills
- Poor listening skills
- Withdrawal
- Anxiety/depression
- Depression
- Poor academic performance
- Limited/awkward or inappropriate social interactions
- Irritability, aggression, or generally poor behavior
- Immaturity

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Students Report:

- Feelings of loneliness
- Missed crucial social interactions
- Less comfortable asking for help
- Less connected to teachers and friends
- Fearfulness
- Embarrassment or guilt regarding academic performance
- Lack of interest in outside activities

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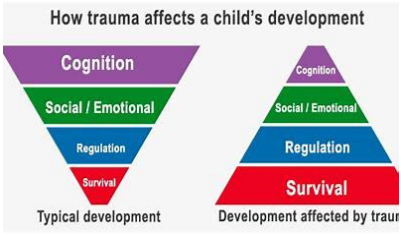
With All This Going On, How Can They Learn and Close the Achievement Gap?



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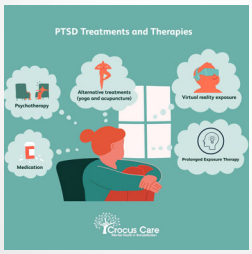
We Can't Treat Every Child For PTSD!



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If we can't do that, What Can We Do?

- Academics can no longer take precedence as a primary focus of our relationship with our students.
- More than ever before, we must address the whole child.
- As with any trauma, attending to the immediate emotional needs of the child are of utmost importance.
- We can't ignore it as if it didn't happen.
- Talk openly about student's feelings about the pandemic.
- Acknowledge fears and validate experiences
- Advocate for mental health services in schools
- Use techniques with our children that make them feel safe

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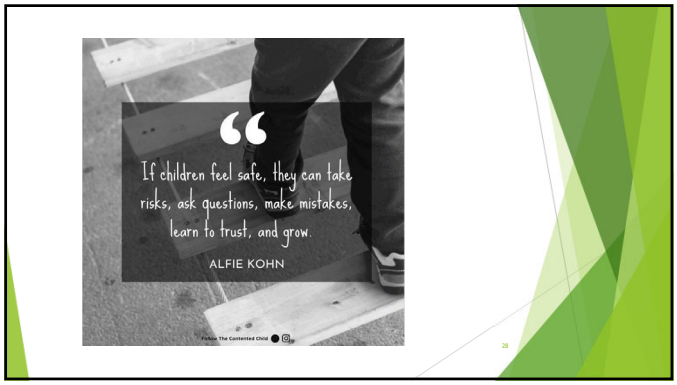

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Cognitive Behavioral and other Techniques to Address Post Pandemic Social/Emotional Issues

- Check-In
- Active Listening
- Restructuring
- Modeling & Role Playing
- Systematic Positive Reinforcement
- Mindfulness

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Check-Ins



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Check-Ins

- Technique can be used by teachers, parents, tutors, educational therapists, extended family.
- Greet child and have a brief chat with them
- Make sure there is time available for this on a daily basis
- As personalized questions
- Include previous knowledge or items from previous discussions
- Can include questions directly related to social/emotional issues, behavior, school success, hobbies, pets, teachers, etc.
- Can utilize feelings charts, number scales, etc.

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Barriers to successful Check-Ins

- Feeling rushed
- Concern that you won't be able to finish everything you need to do
- Concern that something might come up that you can't handle.

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Active Listening



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Active Listening

- Used to encourage open communication, problem solving and understanding, while building rapport and trust.
- Developed by Humanistic psychologist, Carl Rogers
- Includes a wide range of practices.

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Twelve Skills for Active Listening

Restating

- Paraphrase what you think the person said in your own words.
- "Let's see if I'm clear about this. " or "What I hear you saying is…"

Summarizing

- Check for understanding by stating the facts of the problem.
- "It sounds to me like you and your mom don't agree on. . ." or "You and Sean had a fight after school. Is that it?"

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Twelve Skills for Active Listening

Encouragers

- Use brief, positive prompts to keep the conversation going and show you are listening
- "umm-hmmm," "Oh?" "I understand," "Then?" "And?"

Reflecting

- Instead of repeating, reflect the student's words in terms of feelings. This can help the client see things more objectively.
- "This seems really important to you. . ." or " You sound frustrated."

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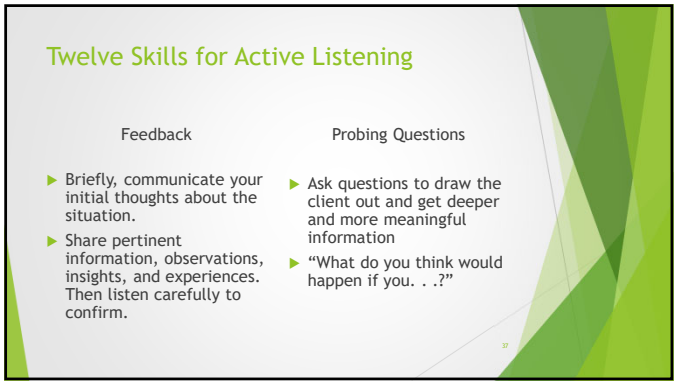
Twelve Skills for Active Listening
Feedback
Briefly, communicate your initial thoughts about the situation.
Share pertinent information, observations, insights, and experiences. Then listen carefully to confirm.
Probing Questions
Ask questions to draw the client out and get deeper and more meaningful information
"What do you think would happen if you. . .?"
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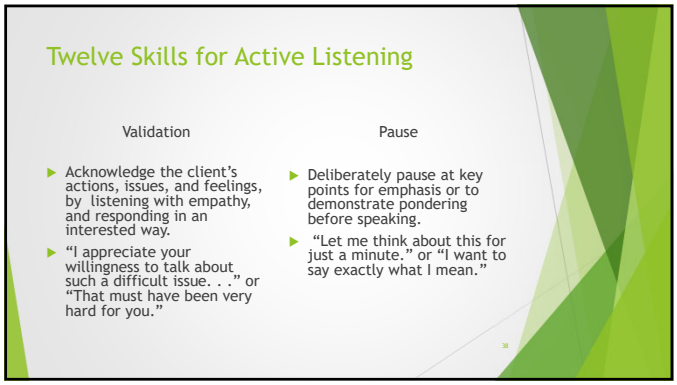
Twelve Skills for Active Listening
Validation
Acknowledge the client's actions, issues, and feelings, by listening with empathy, and responding in an interested way.
"I appreciate your willingness to talk about such a difficult issue. . ." or "That must have been very hard for you."
Pause
Deliberately pause at key points for emphasis or to demonstrate pondering before speaking.
"Let me think about this for just a minute." or "I want to say exactly what I mean."
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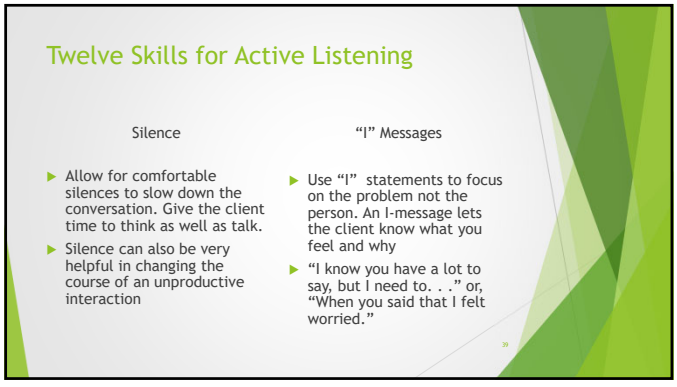
Twelve Skills for Active Listening
Silence
Allow for comfortable silences to slow down the conversation. Give the client time to think as well as talk.
Silence can also be very helpful in changing the course of an unproductive interaction
"I" Messages
Use "I" statements to focus on the problem not the person. An I-message lets the client know what you feel and why
"I know you have a lot to say, but I need to. . ." or, "When you said that I felt worried."
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Twelve Skills for Active Listening

Redirection

- If someone is showing signs of being overly aggressive, agitated, angry, or is perseverating on a topic, shift to another topic or activity.
- "That sounds very upsetting. Did anything else happen in school today?" or redirect client to another activity.

Consequences

- Depending on the issue, it may be necessary to talk about the possible ramifications of the problem. Take your cues from what the child says about the experience.
- "What happened the last time you yelled at another child on the playground?"

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Barriers to Active Listening

- "Why" questions: Can create a defensive atmosphere.
- Quick reassurance: "Don't worry about that."
- Advising :"I think the best thing for you is to …"
- Patronizing: "You poor thing, I know just how you feel."
- Preaching : "You should. . ." Or "You shouldn't. . ."
- Probing for information or forcing the conversation: Can feel invasive rather than supportive.
- Interrupting: Rude and indicates lack of interest in what the child is saying.

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Cognitive Restructuring



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Cognitive Restructuring

- Trauma or other anxiety producing experiences can create cognitive distortion and unrealistic thinking/fears.
- Cognitive Restructuring questions/conversation starters.
  - What are the chances…?
    - When child worrying about something that is very unlikely to happen
  - What is the worst thing…?
    - When a child is catastrophizing possibilities
  - Am I right to think that…?
    - When a child is using faulty or absent evidence
  - What is this worth?
    - When a child is spending a lot of time on a small problem
  - The History Game: Five years from now, will this really matter?

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Barriers to Cognitive Restructuring

- Lack of confidence
- Training
- Time constraints

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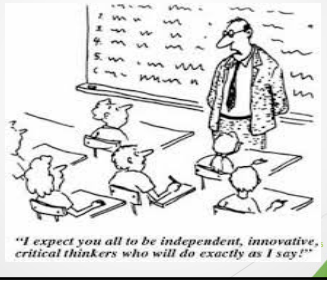
Modeling & Roleplaying



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Modeling

- A technique used to influence behavioral change, and improve interpersonal skills through observation of exemplar behavior
- Developed by Albert Bandura as a means of changing aggressive, violent or other counterproductive social behaviors.

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Modeling

Live Modeling

- Involves the child observing a "model" such as the parent, teacher, or educational therapist, perform a specific behavior
- Holding a door open for the child to pass through, helping pick up something that was dropped, or talking through a problem or, when coming across a difficult word when reading, "I don't know what that word means. I think I'll look it up in the dictionary."

Symbolic Modeling

- Involves the child observing a behavior indirectly.
- Reading a book or watching a video.

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Modeling

Role Playing

- The adult role-plays a behavior with the child in order for the child to practice the behavior.
- Asking a question in class, or meeting a friend on the playground

Participant Modeling

- The adult models the behavior and then does the behavior with the childs.
- Walking to the bus stop or entering the classroom.

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Modeling

Covert modeling

- When it is not possible to observe a desired behavior, the adult may use visualization techniques to model appropriate behavior for a child.
- Describing how the child will act and what they will say when they meet their new teacher.

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Barriers to Modeling & Roleplaying

- Concern about training
- Time constraints
- Wanting to keep focus on academics

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Mindfulness



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Mindfulness

- Relaxation and lowering anxiety are more important than ever in a post lockdown world
- Can be a routine or something you do when needed
- Provides child with techniques that can be used both during and outside of sessions
- Empowers child to take greater control of their lives
- Increases focus
- Helps manage stress
- Prepares child for academic work

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Mindfulness

- Breathing exercises
- Visualization
- Physical challenges/heartbeat exercise/balance
- Body Scan
- Relaxation techniques
- Many, many more

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Systematic Positive Reinforcement



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Systematic Positive Reinforcement

- Encourage positive behaviors or discourage negative behaviors:
- One target at a time
  - ABC
  - Purpose- avoidance or acquisition of something
  - Predictors
    - What is present in or missing from the environment that supports the behavior?
  - Replacement behavior
    - Environmental changes needed to support replacement behavior
      - Time, space, material, interaction

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Systematic Positive Reinforcement

- Reinforcement (positive or negative) means something different than you think
  - Positive to increase behavior
  - Negative to decrease behavior
- Teaching strategies needed
- Reinforcers: physical, verbal, tangible, contingent access, tokens or points, privileges

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Barriers to Systematic Positive Reinforcement

- Difficult to create a well-developed behavior plan
- Experience and training
- Ideas about fairness
- Time involved in creating a well-developed plan
- consistency

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But wait…There's Hope!

- As with more typical trauma, with support, time, and strong, caring relationships the effects of this unique traumatic event can be mitigated.



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Questions or Comments?

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Thank you for Coming!



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