

Holding Space Program: Supporting the Emotional Journey of Implementing Trauma-informed Practice in Early Childhood Settings

Workshop 5: Stress, Trauma, and the Brain: Educator Strategies for the Classroom

Implemented on the CSU Albury-Wodonga Campus Tuesday July 29th 2025

Notes to Accompany Workshop Slides

In this workshop we explored reward systems and why they may not work for children who have experienced trauma; how trauma affects brain development and motivation; the role of Dopamine in rewards; and trauma-informed alternatives. We also re-visited the Neurosequential Model in some detail.

SLIDES 9-17

What are reward systems?

- Stickers, prizes, public praise
- Designed to motivate and reinforce positive behaviour
- Work well for many—but not for all

*Key Question: What if a child doesn't *feel* rewarded?*

Rewards and Trauma

Trauma changes how a child responds to the world—including rewards

Rewards and Trauma

- Trauma affects emotion regulation, trust, sensory processing, and motivation
- Stress response dominates; focus shifts to survival, not rewards

The Role of Dopamine in Rewards

Dopamine is fundamental to our survival. It is the chemical or neurotransmitter/hormone we make in our brain that tells us “this is something we should explore, approach, investigate and will be useful for our survival.”

It has many different functions

- It helps us experience pleasure, reward and motivation, so it is also known as the “pleasure hormone”. It is the hormone that is released when you are eating chocolate, sugary foods, drinking alcohol, taking drugs, playing video games, looking at how many likes you have on socials, etc. So, it is also known as the addiction hormone because when people are using their chosen substance, behaviour, or activity (this is totally individual) the brain becomes flooded with dopamine, making us feel good. It is the chase of feeling good that makes us seek the substance, the behaviour, or activity again.
- Dopamine is more involved in the pursuit and motivation to obtain a desired reward—like a drug or shopping—than in the actual pleasure of receiving it.

- Dopamine is necessary to motivate us to do the work to get the things we need. In an experiment involving rats that had the dopamine taken out of their brain, they would eat if food was placed in their mouth but would starve if it was placed a body's length away.
- Every time we do something pleasurable/ rewarding that effects the dopamine system. If it releases a lot of dopamine such as very addictive drugs then the brain will try and compensate by releasing less. This is why drug addicts need more and more of the drug to get the same feeling until basically the dopamine system shuts down.
- Dopamine is also involved in our motor system as we usually need to locomote to be able to access the thing we are wanting. Parkinson's disease is a lack of dopamine in the part of the brain that controls movement.
- Dopamine is also impacted with ADHD. People with ADHD often have lower levels of dopamine or impaired dopamine signalling in certain brain regions—especially the prefrontal cortex, which is the area of the brain responsible for attention, motivation and impulsivity.
- A traumatic event can lower dopamine production and lead to a reduced sense of pleasure, motivation and general emotional numbness — and children are less likely to view rewards as motivating. Rewards might feel empty, unpredictable, and even unsafe.
- Conversely, a traumatic event may increase dopamine production in an attempt to cope with stress and emotional pain. This can increase behaviours like risk taking and addictions, as the brain seeks to reward itself in the absence of natural pleasure.

Other reasons why rewards may not work for children who have experienced trauma

Besides effecting the dopamine pathway, trauma impacts the brain in other ways that can affect how children view rewards.

- Children can become triggered, dysregulated and hypervigilant causing the prefrontal cortex (thinking part of the brain) to go offline so immediate survival and safety override long term goals setting.

Sense of Trust

- Because they may have learnt to mistrust adults, they may misinterpret rewards as unsafe or manipulative.

Trauma can make it difficult to work toward future outcomes

- Rewards that are delayed or abstract may feel meaningless.
- They may focus on the “now”, not the “If I do X I get Y later”.

Trauma affects feelings of worthiness and self esteem

- Some traumatised children may feel unworthy or expect failure so they might sabotage success unconsciously or might believe they don't deserve rewards.
- Some traumatised children feel reflexive shame and may feel uncomfortable when praised.
- Rewards can feel like bribes instead of genuine encouragement.

Behaviour is Communication

- A dysregulated child is in fight, flight, freeze, fawn and therefore have no control of their behaviour in that moment. Rewards overlook the fact that behaviour may be rooted in fear not choice.

Example Reactions to Rewards

Scenario	Typical response	Trauma Impacted response
• Sticker for sitting still	Excitement	Confusion or shame
• Public praise	Motivation	Fear, embarrassment
• Reward box	Anticipation	Anxiety or shutdown

What children with trauma really need

- Safety: predictable environments
- Connection: trusting relationships
- Regulation: help calming down
- Choice: autonomy

Trauma-informed Alternatives

- Co-regulate with the child
- Use descriptive encouragement
- Create routine and structure
- Offer praise privately
- Provide empowering choices

Reflection

- Think of a child in your room who doesn't respond to rewards
- Consider their unmet needs
- What trauma-informed support could you offer?
- "Connection before correction."

SLIDE 21

See the Trauma Expression and Connection Assessment tool (Australian Childhood Foundation) weblink <https://learn.childhood.org.au/trauma-expression-and-connection-assessment/>

SLIDE 25

See Behaviour as Communication handout; also Workshop Three content on website.

SLIDE 27

See Encouragement vs Praise Handout; and Encouragement Phrases & Reflecting Feelings Handout

SLIDE 29

We chose to finish our workshop with a 'take a little moment' where someone who had been attending our sessions shared an example of how they 'created a community of respect, a community of regulation' in their early childhood service. Perhaps you would like to do the same 😊

Holding Space Program 2025