

THE “3CS” – CHALLENGES, CHANGES, AND CONFLICTS

By Dr. Rick Robinson

As we approach the holiday season we may begin to see students, particularly those with histories of significant adversity and/or active stressors, having difficulty managing what I call the “3C’s” -Challenges, Changes, and Conflicts.

The holidays can be challenging for all of us. On the one hand it is a time that can be filled with gratitude, giving, sharing, belonging, and excitement. On the other hand our routines may be disrupted, we may sleep less and eat more, have stressful and fatiguing travels, increased anxiety, uncomfortable interpersonal interactions, as well as disappointments.

Some of our students may experience less of the upside and more of the downside over the next 6 weeks or so. From now until the end of the first or second week of January, it will be especially important to consider the level of regulation we see in our students and how quickly they can re-regulate after becoming dysregulated.

Here are a couple of ideas to consider that you might find helpful:

- First, remember the mantra, “*Only a well-regulated adult can help regulate a child become regulated.*” Review our earlier blogs describing tools you can use at school (Intentional Breathing, Morning Space, Natural Scenery, A Brisk Walk, Focus on One Thing).
- Second, consider the impact of trauma “triggers” that our students may experience. A trigger is a stimulus that can remind us of a traumatic event and result in the same emotions/behaviors that were originally used to cope with the event. Triggers can be internal or external and may result in unconscious, automatic survival (fight, flight or freeze) responses.

Triggers can involve sensory experiences, (like touch, taste, smell, sounds, and sights) points in time, (like seasons, holidays, anniversaries, times of the year, month or day) or environmental contexts and conditions (like changes, loss of control, new or ambiguous experiences).

The holidays are filled with sensory experiences, from pumpkin spiced lattes, to decorative lights, to bells at the entrance to the grocery store. Holiday celebrations, seasonal weather changes, annual family activities and the like occur. And lastly, breaks from school and loss of typical supports are part of the holiday break.

When we see students struggling with the 3 C’s, viewing their behavior through a trauma informed mindset regarding potential triggers can be vital in maintaining our own regulation and developing supports when a student is triggered by an event or activity that is

experienced positively by many students. In observing a student's pattern of dysregulated behaviors (reactive and shut-down), consider what potential triggers may be present as a first step in planning.

- Third, students with a history of adverse experiences can have a higher baseline level of arousal than students without such histories. As a result they may be more sensitive and reactive than their peers. In addition, these students may also have a number of lagging skills including difficulties with developing and maintaining smoothly running relationships and with physical, emotional and behavioral regulation.

During the holidays it is important to remember that we will likely need to fortify the two pillars of trauma-informed *care-predictability and relational safety*. Make sure that you are mindful when implementing schedule changes, new or spontaneous activities. When changes occur, transition into and out of these activities with the same routines you use in your typical daily practice. In addition, design activities using the same instructional routines you regularly use, in say math or English. Importantly, you may consider increasing the use of visual supports to help students understand what to do, and how to do it as well as the sequence of events.

Lastly, in designing activities, have regularly scheduled and structured Stop — Check — Regulate breaks. Set a timer using your best guess regarding how long most students can maintain regulation, then use your attention signal and routine to gain your students' attention. Next, check-in with the class regarding participation expectations, followed by a brief structured regulation activity. With this strategy, you can attune to how the class is managing the activity, as well as to students who may be struggling. Proactive group and individual adjustments can be made so students can maintain a level of regulation allowing them to successfully engage in the activity.