

Attunement and Engagement

**The Importance of Maintaining a Connection With Students
in a Therapeutic Classroom**

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It is easy to become distracted or preoccupied while teaching or assisting in a therapeutic classroom. However, being present and aware, being attuned to the student and the situation lowers student distress. Maintaining a teacher-student connection in a therapeutic classroom depends on a level of focused attention that convinces the student that you have nothing else to do and nothing else to think about right now except what is right in front of you.

Some students in therapeutic classrooms come with insecure attachments, poor bonding and limited capacity to trust adults. Some of these students have been rejected, neglected and mistreated by adults and peers. They have been told, over and over again, that they've been a disappointment, a source of trouble, a source of misery and that they are incompetent and incapable. Some of these students feel unwanted and unloved.

Many emotionally troubled children are raised by hard-working, caring adults, but sometimes emotionally troubled children are raised by detached parents, parents who are too often preoccupied with their own problems, the daily stress of their own lives; parents who don't have the time, the resources, or the patience to focus on the needs of their children. Sometimes parents are detached because they are under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or they're too depressed or consumed with anxiety. The children of detached parents are insecure and overly sensitive to other adults who are detached. Sometimes, being in the presence of detached adults in the classroom can trigger attention seeking and acting out behavior.

Attuned people read the emotional states of others and they adjust their interactions accordingly. When students sense that teachers are attuned to them they are more emotionally settled, feel more secure, and develop greater feelings of trust. It quiets the limbic system, lowers alarm, and enables students to be more focused on the present, better able to process and respond appropriately to what is going on around them. When a teacher is not attuned to a student, and that student has a history of poor attachment experiences, the student can easily become distressed. Some children desperately pursue security in others at the slightest feeling of their own distress.

Emotional attunement starts with careful observation, watching students closely as they react to and make minor adjustments to small events around them. These observations should lead to changes in the teacher's voice tone, as well as the content of their communication. The pace of the communication is also adjusted as well as physical proximity. All of these adjustments are processed by the student's brain on a subconscious level and they lead to feelings of greater security and trust (lowered

stress and alarm, more settled emotionally) because the student feels understood and protected from becoming overwhelmed.

When there is little emotional attunement the student's brain processes the relationship as potentially threatening or challenging or not capable of helping when help is needed. Perhaps the teacher will overwhelm the student or demand too much or fail to notice the distress. The presence of such a person activates a subconscious process (emotional memories activated, stress response activated, alarm level raised) leading to feelings of insecurity and anxiety, lack of trust, and potential threat.

Attunement is a dance, each party signaling and responding to the other. When it works well people feel understood, secure, and comfortable. When it doesn't go well people feel threatened, insecure, and stressed. Students welcome the person who is attuned and reject or act out in the presence of the person who isn't. High levels of attunement enhance communication while low levels of attunement create communication breakdowns. High levels of attunement create an easier give and take while low levels of attunement create struggles and it is constant work to maintain the relationship.

Quality of engagement is achieved by "being present" and in the moment, free from preoccupations and responsive to subtle cues in the person and the environment. Engagement increases when you comment on the experience you are having with the student while you are with the student (like a brief commentary). This commenting process also ensures that the student stores the memory of the experience that you want the student to have because student focus is brought to what you consider important. While reading a book with the student you could comment,

"I am enjoying this time with you. We have our own great private spot to read. There's nothing else we have to think about right now. We can both just enjoy reading the story together. I like finding out what you think, what you like about the story. You have some great ideas."

Small moments of quality engagement, focused exclusively on the student, free from other distractions are tremendous relationship builders, especially when your commentary forms a positive visual memory for the student. Just five minutes can become a very meaningful experience.

Promoting High Quality Engagement

Disengagement or poor quality engagement raises the perceived need level among students with poor attachment or trauma in their background. It can cause these students to detach from the present and retreat to the past or worry about the future. Poor quality engagement raises the distress level and can trigger neglect experiences.

Following is a list of factors to consider as you evaluate your own level of engagement with students in your classroom. Most of these factors bypass conscious appraisal in the student and instead they create an automatic or subconscious response.

- 1) Where is your visual focus when you are in the classroom?
- 2) What is your proximity to the students?
- 3) Your level of effective nonverbal communication should be very high.
- 4) Talking directly to students is at a much higher rate than talking to other adults in the room.
- 5) You listen with patience and respond with thought.
- 6) Your body is turned toward the student and you make eye contact. Bend down, move closer. Don't look past the student while talking to the student.
- 7) You are able to make frequent, very specific, evidence-based reinforcing statements.
- 8) Your efforts to engage insecure students increases during "down time", throughout transitions, and while the student is working independently.
- 9) You read emotion in the student and respond in timely fashion with adjustments and support.
- 10) You use reflective listening to clarify and restate what you think the student is telling you.
- 11) You know what a student needs before the student states the need (or before the student acts out the frustration).
- 12) Response time is not delayed, staring off, appearing preoccupied is limited.
- 13) You report on what you see and what you hear, you convince the student that you are in the present, that you are a "noticer".
- 14) You redirect with a reference to routine.
- 15) You redirect with a reference to a visual.
- 16) You establish quiet, order, clarity and simplicity, rather than attempt to connect amidst chaos.
- 17) Reduce the level of extraneous talk (particularly between the adults in the room).
- 18) Reduce the level of talk on the phone or use of the phone in the presence of the students. Student need increases significantly when a parent or teacher is attending to a phone. The children know (subconsciously) or believe that their needs are not going to be met in the near future so their distress goes up.
- 19) Talk with a pace that shows you are measuring the student's comprehension as you talk. Slow down and restate when you notice confusion or distress.
- 20) Start talking to the student after the student has been readied to listen and after you notice you have their attention. Secure attention first, then deliver the message.
- 21) Control background noise.
- 22) Simplify the visual organization of the classroom, reduce the clutter, organize what is put on the walls, cover the opening to shelves.
- 23) Avoid talking to an individual student by talking over and across other students. Move closer instead of talking from across the room.