Building Connections to Help Every Child Succeed: A Multi-theoretical Lens for Implementing SEL Programs

February 25, 2020
Layla Kurt, Ph.D. & Shealan McAlister, B.A. School Counselor Intern
University of Dayton

This session will address childhood developmental models (Erikson, Maslow), our biological drive for safety (Polyvagal theory), and how early childhood attachment impacts lifelong learning (Attachment theory).

We will cover:

- Hierarchy of Needs
- Attachment Theory: Need for Connections
- Polyvagal Theory: Innate Drive for Safety
  - Survival Brain vs. Thinking Brain
  - ACEs
- How to Help Children Build Connections
- What Teachers Can Do
  - Multi-theoretical lens for building classroom culture
  - Emotion regulation & co-regulation
  - District-wide stress reduction

“The big issue for traumatized people is that they don’t own themselves anymore. Any loud sound, anybody insulting them, hurting them, saying bad things, can hijack them away from themselves. And so what we have learned is that what makes you resilient to trauma is to own yourself fully.”
Dr. Bessel van der Kolk
Building Connections

In order for educators to best help at-risk and all children, we need to understand attachment to primary and secondary caregivers. From birth, our society encourages the mother and newborn to begin the bonding/attachment process through skin-to-skin contact. We further encourage parents to cuddle, talk, and read to their babies and young children. But, what happens to the child when this process does not occur or, worse, the child experiences neglect, abuse, or other traumas?

**Primary attachment** typically occurs with the infant’s primary caregiver who responds to the infant’s needs (touch, food, health care). Ideally, the primary caregiver is consistently available and responsive to the child’s needs.

Bowlby’s primary attachment theory states this acts as a prototype for the child’s future relationships. Therefore, if the child has an unhealthy attachment to their caregiver, they will potentially have unhealthy secondary attachments.

**Secondary attachments** are the bonds developed between non-primary caregivers such as relatives, teachers, and friends. Secondary attachments are important because they provide another opportunity for children to form safe and caring connections with others.

**Why is attachment important?**

Through bonds children are able to safely take risks and explore the world. Erik Erikson details the process of psychosocial developmental stages beginning in infancy with trust vs. mistrust, moving to early childhood with autonomy vs. shame and doubt. The next stage is initiative vs. guilt and then industry vs. inferiority in childhood. Adolescents progress through the identity vs. role confusion stage. Each stage builds upon the preceding stage and is marked by either success or failure to meet developmental psychosocial abilities at each stage.

When children fail to develop social skills and emotion regulation skills they are at-risk of developing a sense of personal inadequacy rather than the sense of mastery needed for healthy psychosocial development. Let’s take a look at Erikson’s and Maslow’s theories of development and how development, coupled with attachment style and trauma history (ACEs) impacts a person’s ability to learn and regulate emotions. The essential components students need in order to learn.

**Erik Erikson’s Stages of Development**

**Hope: Trust vs. Mistrust** (infancy, under 2 years)
- Existential Question: *Can I Trust the World?*

**Will: Autonomy vs. Shame/Doubt** (toddlerhood, 2–4 years)
- Existential Question: *Is It Okay to Be Me?*

**Purpose: Initiative vs. Guilt** (early childhood, 5–8 years)
- Existential Question: *Is it Okay for Me to Do, Move, and Act?*

**Competence: Industry vs. Inferiority** (middle childhood, 9–12 years)
- Existential Question: *Can I Make it in the World of People and Things?*

Remember, each stage builds upon the previous stage. What happens to a person if healthy development fails to occur at each of these stages?
Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow offers a depiction of the hierarchy of needs from a survival perspective. Similar to Erik Erikson’s stages of development, Maslow’s theory is sequential in that the lower level of needs must be met in order for an individual to fully progress to higher levels of needs such as self-actualization. In this diagram, Erikson’s stages are listed as they parallel Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. This diagram is designed to help educators and school counselors see how Erikson’s stages plus Maslow’s hierarchy tells us where student needs may have gone unmet. By uncovering this information, intervention teams can identify where the child may have stalled in various developmental stages.

If the needs for Esteem, Love/Belonging, Safety, and Physiological wellness are not met, motivation decreases. What does this mean for our at-risk learners? Does this already look familiar?
Adverse childhood experiences, or **ACEs**, are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0-17 years). For example:

- experiencing violence or abuse
- witnessing violence in the home or community
- having a family member attempt or die by suicide

Also included are aspects of the child’s environment that can undermine their sense of safety, stability, and bonding such as growing up in a household with:

- substance misuse
- mental health problems
- instability due to parental separation or household members being in jail or prison

ACEs are linked to chronic health problems, mental illness, and substance misuse in adulthood. ACEs can also negatively impact education and job opportunities. However, ACEs can be prevented.


Children and adults who have experienced ACEs, may exhibit some of the characteristic below.

**Trauma looks like:**

- Intrusive thoughts
- Avoidance
- Over attachment (clingy, whining demanding)
- Hyperarousal, overreactions to situations (fear)
- Reactive behaviors (outbursts)
- Dissociated (daydreaming)
- Refusal to cooperate
The role of our autonomic system and how learning is impacted

The vagus nerve serves to protect us from danger. It connects our brains to our sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system as a primary survival mechanism. We are wired to respond to danger involuntarily so that we may survive. What this means is when a person senses danger, the body responds to provide immediate protection from threat by flight, fight, or freeze. We can categorize our brain state as being in a state of survival or thinking/learning. When we are in survival brain, our autonomic nervous has involuntarily kicked in, revved up for survival against an instinctually* perceived threat. When in survival brain people are led by reactions, rather than thought out decision-making process. When we are in thinking/learning brain, we are safe and able to focus on being in the present moment and meeting demands.

When we are connected with others:
- We feel normal happiness, openness, and curiosity
- We sleep well
- Our appetite is healthy
- Our face is expressive
- We emotionally relate to others
- We are more easily able to understand and relate to others
- We feel calm and grounded

* Based on polyvagal theory, the perception can be based on repeated experienced that have formed neuropathways that jump the individual right to fight, flight, freeze.

https://psychiatrypodcast.com/psychiatry-psychotherapy-podcast/polyvagal-theory-understanding-emotional-shutdown

Connections with primary and secondary caregivers teaches emotion regulation

![Diagram](image.png)
How Adverse Childhood Experiences and Trauma Impact Learners

WINDOW OF TOLERANCE- TRAUMA/ANXIETY RELATED RESPONSES:
Widening the Comfort Zone for Increased Flexibility

*ANXIETY
*OVERWHELMED
*CHAOTIC RESPONSES
*OUTBURSTS (EMOTIONAL OR AGGRESSIVE)
*ANGER/AGGRESSION/RAGE

HYPER-ARoused

Fight/Flight Response

TO STAY IN THE WINDOW OF TOLERANCE:
*Mindfulness—Being Present, in Here-n-Now
*Grounding Exercises
*Techniques for Self-Soothing, Calming the Body & Emotional Regulation
*Deep, Slow Breathing
*Recognize Limiting Beliefs, Counter with Positive Statements About Self, New Choices

TO STAY OUT IN THE WINDOW OF TOLERANCE:
*Mindfulness—Being Present, in Here-n-Now
*Grounding Exercises
*Techniques for Self-Soothing, Calming the Body & Emotional Regulation
*Deep, Slow Breathing
*Recognize Limiting Beliefs, Counter with Positive Statements About Self, New Choices

CAUSES TO GO OUT OF THE WINDOW OF TOLERANCE:
*Fear of... Unconscious Thought & Bodily Feeling: Control, Unsafe, I do not exist, Abandonment, Rejection
*Trauma-Related CORE Beliefs about self are triggered: Emotional & Physiological Dysregulation occurs

CONFORT ZONE
EMOTIONALLY REGULATED
Calm, Cool, Collected, Connected

ABILITY TO SELF-SOOTHE
ABILITY TO REGULATE EMOTIONAL STATE

Staying within the window allows for better relationship interactions

FREEZE RESPONSE

*FEIGN DEATH RESPONSE
*Dissociation
*Not Present
*Unavailable/Shutdown
*Memory Loss

HYPO-ARoused

Survival Brain

OR

Thinking/Learning Brain

Co-Regulation

As a child’s ability to self-regulate increases, the less they rely on the assistance of co-regulation. The need for co-regulation can be present for any child and does not serve as definitive indicator of abuse, trauma, or neglect. As children get older, the need for co-regulation shifts to a need for monitoring and support of skill attainment.

How do we teach co-regulation?

➢ Teach emotion identification and vocabulary.

➢ Model the behaviors you want your students/children to learn.

➢ Using positive regard, divert the child’s attention elsewhere.

➢ Offer a warm, nurturing, and supportive relationship. Convey warmth and safety through tone of voice, eye contact, and supportive language.

➢ Use positive reinforcement.

➢ Set and maintain clear limits and expectations.

➢ Structure the environment to be student-centered allowing students options to enact self-regulation skills.
Characteristics that support co-regulation skills.

• Emotional literacy, including recognizing emotions and using words to express more complex feelings
• Emotion regulation:
  o Ignoring things that are mildly irritating, distracting, or frustrating
  o Calming down using strategies like deep breathing, relaxation, imagery, or positive self-talk
• Social flexibility, such as trying a friend’s idea or considering others’ perspectives
• Social skills, like being patient and taking turns
• Paying attention and staying focused
• Working independently
• Persistence with difficult tasks
• Problem-solving skills and flexible thinking

Teaching co-regulation

Co-Regulation for Elementary-aged Children
• Continue to provide a warm, nurturing, supportive relationship
• Assist in problem-solving more complex academic, behavioral, and social situations
• Model conflict resolution strategies
• Prompt and coach coping skills and calm-down strategies, including self-talk and relaxation
• Teach and support organization and planning skills needed for academic success
• Provide opportunities to make decisions and self-monitor behavior
• Continue to provide clear rules, structure, and consequences in a calm manner

Co-Regulation for Adolescents
• Provide a warm, responsive relationship
• Provide support and empathy in times of intense emotion
• Model, monitor, and coach more sophisticated self-regulation skills across different contexts
• Monitor and limit opportunities for risk-taking behavior
• Provide opportunities to make decisions and self-monitor behavior in less risky situations
• Give time and space to calm down in times of conflict
• Monitor and prompt use of organizational and planning skills for successful task completion
• Continue clear rules, boundaries, and consequences to incentivize good choices

From: https://fpg.unc.edu/sites/fpg.unc.edu/files/resources/reports-and-policy-briefs/Co-RegulationFromBirthThroughYoungAdulthood.pdf
The Eight Basic Social and Emotional Needs of Children and Adults

1. To be safe and secure.
2. To be loved and have a sense of self-worth.
3. To receive attention and be understood.
4. To have a sense of control and predictability.
5. To recognize and be able to handle strong feelings.
6. To have a sense of power and feel independent and competent.
7. To be engaged in stimulating pursuits.
8. To enjoy relationships and have a sense of belonging.

15 things teachers can do to help student who struggle with emotion regulation.

1. Prioritize the student’s feeling of safety
2. Build relationships with each child
3. Regulate your emotions when under stress and duress
4. Make contact with each child
5. Listen, seek to understand
6. Show Empathy
7. Learn to recognize stress responses and distress cues
8. Offer warmth and compassion
9. Maintain a growth mindset
10. Collaborate with wraparound stakeholders
11. Build connections with parents
12. Understand the cause of the exhibited behaviors
13. Provide structure, predictable routine, and firm boundaries
14. Nurture the learner
15. **Practice routine self-care**
Finally, school administrators, teachers, staff, and faculty need intentional strategies to address stress and resiliency. It is vital to our children that we take care of ourselves and each other by creating positive, happy environments where everyone has the opportunity to grow into the best version of ourselves.

About the presenters

Layla Kurt, Ph.D., PC is an Assistant Professor at the University of Dayton. She has experience working in K-12 education as a teacher, assistant principal, and school counselor. She is also a licensed professional counselor (escrow) and has worked in private practice helping families through behavioral struggles and family changes. Her research interests are in the correlation between student success and school-based attachments and school climate.

Shealan McAlister is a school counseling graduate student at the University of Dayton and a school counseling intern at a southwestern Ohio high school. She holds and undergraduate degree in psychology from the University of Cincinnati. She has six years of experience working at Cincinnati Children’s hospital as a research assistant. Her current research involvement is in early childhood mental health; Social Emotional Learning; student success and school connectedness.

Correspondence can be directed to Layla Kurt, lkurt1@udayton.edu or Shealan McAlister, mcalisters1@udayton.edu