

Oct. 2 Program Summary

Northeast Branch and Heights-Hillcrest-Branch members were fortunate to hear an explanation of trauma informed educational methods at our Oct. 2nd meeting at Applebees in Willoughby Hills from two women who have devoted their lives to helping such children learn. Barbara Oehlberg explained the theories while Meryl Johnson gave practical examples gleaned from her 40 years of teaching.

The fundamental theory is that traumatic experiences in children under age 2 are stored in the amygdala and referred to as “implicit memories.” Barbara stressed that because these memories are not stored in the thinking brain, they cannot be expunged through talking. She explained, “They are laid down without words and without context. The child knows something is wrong but doesn’t know why. Their efforts to release the stress or find relief, are often interpreted as discipline problems.” Barbara said that such children are experiencing stress and anxiety rather than anger and need “soothing touches and quiet words.”

Meryl gave an example of a student whose problem originated this way. The child refused to sit near a window. Fortunately, efforts were made to find out if there might be a logical reason for this issue. It turned out that when the child was 2, a car had come through the window of his home. Because this incident occurred when the child was 2, the memory was not stored in his thinking brain. As soon as the teacher learned this and allowed the child to sit away from the window, the problem disappeared.

The problem is complicated in some children who miss out on developing essential neurological connections in the first three months of life or in early childhood. “If they miss this, they miss out on important brain development that can’t be made up unless the issue is addressed through movement of the hands and inclusion all of the arts.” Also, unaddressed trauma presents a barrier to critical thinking. Allowing children to create solutions that help or bring comfort to other children helps build new neurological connections demonstrating the plasticity of the brain.

Barbara noted that parents can also inadvertently pass their unprocessed trauma onto a child. When an infant senses a parent is anxious, infant sees its own survival as being at risk. Parents love children in the way they received love when they were little. Children don’t cause their own trauma and can’t heal themselves alone. Traumatized children need to be offered activities that involve movement of the hands. Many children are more relaxed while they are coloring

or drawing, for example. Barbara said that “activities of movement with the hands will allow information to move from the amygdala to the thinking brain so they can process it.”

Meryl reported that a Texas professor says children living in trauma only hear about 50% of the words said in a classroom. Meryl gave an example of what trauma informed education looks like the classroom: She noted that traumatized children will often ask what are supposed to do when they had just been told. “Before trauma informed education, I would have been annoyed,” she said. So I asked other children to tell them. She said her work with Barbara has led her to present information about trauma informed strategies to the State Board of Education. She said that third grade tests cause some children to vomit and wet their pants because they don’t know how to use a computer for the test.

Both women believe that helping children process through their trauma can result in averting poverty by giving them the means to hold a job. To work toward that end, they decided to produce a You Tube Video. It is entitled “Growing Your Child’s Brain.” “It would be great if pediatricians would play it in their waiting rooms,” Barbara noted. Members may view it on You Tube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjoYSop0Ahl>. Barbara has also written a number of books to guide teachers and parents in the application of techniques that will heal trauma that can be purchased on Amazon. “Making It Better: Activities for Children Living in a Stressful World,” for teachers of elementary and parents. Those interested in more information can go to her website at: <http://www.reachingdifficultkids.org>, which offers links to further information as well as this summary of the basic concepts underlying the approach:

- Experiencing loss, trauma, intense fear, or terror erodes children’s feelings of safety and creates a physiologic effect on their brain function, which can impair cognitive processing and impede learning.
- Students who are so affected undergo a “cognitive lockout” and act out or withdraw from social, emotional, and intellectual challenges, not by choice, but because of a physiologic and emotional reaction to some feeling of fear that became integrated into their development.
- Brain research indicates that a touch, smell, noise or sight in the classroom or playground can trigger the amygdala, the structure of the brain directing negative reactions to fear, arousal and

anger, to disrupt rational thought by causing a surge of adrenaline, invoking the fight-or-flight reaction.

- Continued release of adrenaline, and the companion hormone cortisol, is known to cause loss of memory. Children who can't remember, can't learn.
- Students who act out often have no idea why or what triggered their misbehavior; nevertheless, they are generally punished – for physiologic reactions, and not due to a wanton disregard for the rules of conduct.

You may also want to view Barbara and Meryl's participation in a City Club of Cleveland panel discussion on this topic: <https://youtu.be/Id0VWXJzMfA>.