**Schools key to our kids’ recovery: Why the 3 Cs count before grades**

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I am writing this blog not in my usual role as a parenting author and former teacher. I am writing it as someone who has worked closely with children, families and communities dealing with and recovering from trauma.

For those parents whose children attend school, the next six months will be a critical window in which to shape our children’s futures. Given that this virus will continue to impact families, communities, workplaces, shopping centres and public transport for quite some time, schools will be the bridge between families and the outside world.

Our children spend around 30 hours a week during school term in school communities away from their parents.

How schools navigate these uncertain months ahead will be so important for the whole school community, and it will be a huge determining factor as to how children cope long term.

Students are not just brains sitting on seats or sources of data or future commodities for the economy. They are whole children and need to be treated as such. There have been so many wonderful examples of caring schools reaching across the isolation boundary to remind students and their parents, that they were missed and still being cared for.

The drive-bys, the hours and hours of time spent by teachers creating digital content and even the creative staff dance-offs were all attempts by committed, dedicated teachers to continue to be caring educators.

The new-found respect for the teaching profession has been long overdue.

For too long teachers have been disrespected and often ignored, in the planning of curriculum (especially the National Curriculum), the irrational need for accountability, the one-size-fits-all mentality and the increased testing which ironically keeps stealing the time that teachers use to practise the art of teaching!

Many students and teachers will find it difficult to return to how schooling was pre-COVID-19 and expectations around excessive testing, homework and other school related ‘stressors’ will need much consideration. The last thing any school will want to do is slow the recovery following this global crisis – it has been a traumatic event in the lives of everyone.

**The impact of disruption & trauma**

Many students returning to the classroom after isolation, will have depleted energy as their amygdala keeps being on guard and there will be a stronger need for proximity to where they feel safest until they find or restore their previous sense of security.

This disruption has been going on for over two months and so the neural pathways that were once present around school familiarity, will have weakened. Not lost completely but as the brain theory goes, “what fires together, wires together”. Neuroplasticity can create new pathways in the time students have been away – some helpful and some not.

For those children who were already impacted by the bushfires before this pandemic, they may be struggling either overtly or invisibly. Their traumatic event was catastrophic and over a long period of time. The evidence of the devastation is probably still fully evident as a reminder of how scary that time was for them. Adding a pandemic into the lives of these children, can create some significant challenges in terms of their capacity to learn.

Epigenetics has explored how trauma can pass from generation to generation on the genomes of the DNA. This science has also found that serious trauma changes the brain. In normal healthy children who have experienced no trauma, and who have had a good night’s sleep in a safe environment, the brain is able to function at its best.

Firstly, it processes all of the experiences that have happened during the day, it shifts learning and information from short-term memory to long-term memory and it creates new learning spaces for the next day.

With children who have experienced significant trauma, the brain instead focuses all of its energy on survival, rather than growing, thriving and getting smart. Even up to 12 to 18 months after a traumatic event, children’s brains can reduce the number of spaces for new learning.

This means that children can struggle to learn at the same level as before the trauma, and their capacity for cognitive attention in the classroom can also be weakened.

I once worked with a primary school that had burnt down and the teachers found exactly this had happened to every student. They had to reduce the amount of teaching and learning, and they also noticed that for the first three months after the fire, children could not recall prior learning at all. Such is the impact of trauma on children’s fragile, developing brains.

It may be unfair for children who are just returning back to mainstream classrooms after a time that has been incredibly scary for them – where our streets were empty, numbers of predicted deaths skyrocketed, jobs were lost, shops were closed, people panicked about toilet paper, rice and pasta – to expect them to learn as before. For sensitive children this sense of panic could have some long-term impacts on their brains.

It would be fabulous for this term at least, to go gently with expectations on what and how much our children can learn in our classrooms. They will be returning home more exhausted, or emotionally depleted until they feel safe in the world again. Expecting them to complete homework especially in K-6 during the next few months, may just add to their stress levels which will have a flow-on effect of poor sleep, which again impacts the brain negatively.

If schools hurry ‘to catch up’, with what may have been missed, they could unintentionally cause more damage and delay the recovery capacity of the brain.

There is some good news. When schools prioritise connection, calmness and cohesion they can seriously improve student wellbeing, especially mentally and emotionally. The sooner students feel safe, in a predictable environment, with positive relationships with their teachers and staff, their brains can begin to function more calmly so they can learn more effectively.

1. **Connection**

Our most exceptional teachers know that good teaching and learning begins with relationships.

Relationship fulfils our most fundamental need as humans – social connectedness. Until that need is met, the nervous system will be in a state of hypervigilance because, without a sense of belonging, the primitive brain perceives a threat to our survival.

Given that the vast majority of our children have been in isolation with the safest grown-ups they know, they will be returning to school a little bit wary on some level.

Home has been the hero for a couple of months. For school to feel equally safe will take time, even for the most confident of our kids.

Rebuilding familiar routines and rituals within classrooms is important. With many schools having students who attended during isolation, there may be some shifts in the social dynamics and friendship groups that may need a teacher to help with. Some of the school procedures regarding drop-offs, which gates to use, staggered recess and lunch time, and having extra cleaning staff, can create more stress as students get used to things being done a little differently from before. They will adjust and some will do so very quickly but some very sensitive children may take weeks. The brain loves predictability and it wants to be able to identify a new sense of normal, so it can relax a little.

Hopefully the overcrowded curriculum and maybe how we do reports may be modified [as it already is in some schools](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-27/perth-school-rethinks-report-cards-in-move-away-from-grades/12285020?fbclid=IwAR01sFipWDafuECDrM2QhOblfqrTQDkbGbvN2Mt2fOG7MPfhQg-aR8NLNhw). P­rioritising activities that use play and lightness and fun, will ensure that students begin to reconnect with not only their teacher, but also other students. Psychologists call this ‘relational safety’. The more connected students feel, the safer they feel and the more energy they have to contribute to the learning process.

Stressed brains simply cannot learn well. The children whose families are doing it particularly tough due to the loss of a job, loss of a loved one or any other trauma will come into class every day with a much more overloaded nervous system.

Some of this will be anxiety and for some children who are living with family stress, the behaviour can sometimes become challenging. This can be a cry for help. These children are not bad or naughty, they are struggling to cope. For more information on this, check out the work of [Dr Ross Greene](https://drrossgreene.com/) and [Dr Mona Delahooke](https://monadelahooke.com/).

Classrooms that use playful opportunities and even creative pursuits amongst the curriculum, are doing such important work. I recommend the [Positive Schools](http://positiveschools.com/) site and The Geelong Grammar School’s [Institute of Positive Education](http://ggs.vic.edu.au/institute) so please visit both of their sites if you are keen to learn more.

1. **Calmness**

Other than connectedness, calmness needs to be a priority. Mindfulness opportunities can also really help all children, especially those who are struggling, every single day, to feel safer in their little bodies.

Every grown-up will have moments when they feel wobbly, stressed or really tense and worried because COVID-19 is an invisible threat to our survival. It doesn’t matter how well we can rationalise the chances of catching it, our primitive brain will keep us in a semi-alert state, just in case.

Each time a school or community location has a reported new case, it will re-trigger more stress and anxiety. That is because we are human.

When we are stressed we are much more likely to be reactive in our responses – to be angrier, use a louder voice and look for ways to reduce the tension or cortisol in the brain, such as by drinking coffee, eating lots of chocolate and high-fat high-sugar foods or secretly wanting to run away and hide!

When schools bring calmness into the curriculum, everyone wins. I have done a whole series of very short videos called [Maggie Soothers](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLqHVXsJtte08epj4OYpsUuews2kzyxmbr) that teach simple ways to calm down our nervous systems, for both big people and little people. Some of these take less than 30 seconds to do, so they can be easily dropped into classrooms. When a whole-school approach can be taken from early years right through to Year 12, students can fully embed simple relaxation techniques into their lives before they step out into the real world. Better still, whole-school communities can benefit, as can the office staff! Many schools are already doing many of these things.

This is a whole school calmness approach that I developed many years ago.

**10 Calm School Habits**

1. Strong human connectedness and belonging
2. One-minute silence at the beginning and end of the day with some soothing music or a sound bath
3. Regular moments of relaxation and stillness – 30 seconds-1 min
4. Deep slow breathing/sighing
5. Thinking pauses, brain breaks and brain rests
6. Mindfulness moments – including closed eye exercises
7. Time in nature with veggie gardens, nature play and even more outdoor learning opportunities
8. Gratitude reflections often
9. Laugher and lightness windows – fun releases the stress hormone cortisol
10. Movement and music – triggers positive neurochemicals.

We cannot leave to chance the high levels of stress students are experiencing, in a world that is still uncertain and continually changing. This approach also gives teachers and other staff some support for their own stressed nervous systems.

Schools have students six hours a day, five days a week and they are in the best position to create intentional opportunities that induce calmness.

I am a proud ambassador for [Smiling Mind](https://www.smilingmind.com.au/) and they run excellent programs for school communities that help reduce stress and anxiety. Another great source of school resources I recommend is [The Resilience Project](https://theresilienceproject.com.au/) founded by Hugh van Cuylenberg. Also, I explore this in my book [Saving our Children from our Chaotic World](https://www.maggiedent.com/shop/books/saving-our-children-our-chaotic-world/).

1. **Cohesion**

Schools are a form of system and, when viewed more as a community than just a place where children go to learn, the protective nature can be appreciated. The words “we are all in this together” could not be truer than in a school community. From the cleaners, gardeners, admin staff, teaching staff and leadership team, the parent body, right through to every student who attends, there is a fundamental need to feel that one belongs. When there is a strong sense of belonging, there is a strong sense of cohesion. Dr Helen Street [describes social cohesion](https://positivetimes.com.au/classroom-glue-by-dr-helen-street/) as a form of glue and, let’s face it, we need to stick together. The social connections that can exist in a cohesive school community can provide everyone with the emotional support, material help and information they need to thrive.

It can be helpful to prioritise staff collegiality with general consideration for wellbeing. This may mean ensuring that staff feel cared for and respected. Words of appreciation, gratitude, gestures of goodwill, like special morning teas or lunches just to keep the spirit high, can all help. These gestures can come from within the school or from the parent body outside of the school, or even from the community that the school belongs to.

Communication with families around the ways and means that schools are taking care of their students’ wellbeing can also be really helpful, hopeful and reassuring for worried parents. This is where schools can create a supportive buffer between families and the still potentially scary world. When students feel a sense of belonging, and safety in an environment that is meeting their wellbeing needs, their opportunities to learn well will be enhanced.

Every child, parent and teacher is navigating this journey differently. Some have thrived learning in isolation, while others found it really difficult. Let’s be honest, everyone has been doing the best they can. Now is the time to gather together in communities to support our schools, especially as we take each day as best we can.

With a focus on connection, calmness and cohesion whole school communities can play an incredibly important role in the recovery from this trauma because we are working with whole children who need us to have hearts that care.

In the words of an excellent school leader, Clark Wight from Guildford Grammar School in Perth:

“We need to focus on what truly matters in education – the people and our relationships with them. A call to action is more important and timely than ever. We need to learn. We need to learn about people.”