

(As you review this highlighted version of the ACEs article, please substitute whatever title, age or setting and you will find the same information to be true there as well. Also, unlike this author, we at LifeWork Systems assert that punishment and rewards are equally harmful to adults and children functioning from *cause and effect* brains as much as to those in *fight/flight/freeze brains*. ~ Judy Ryan)

The Absence of Punishment in Our Schools



[REBECCA LEWIS-PANKRATZ](#)

Where to begin...

My heart is full of hope and joy as I watch the trauma-informed schools movement swell across our nation and planet. The science of ACEs is mind-bending to say the least and we are now able to open up a much deeper dialogue about human behavior and health. Ultimately this work is about healing... All. Of. Us.

A new consciousness is taking root around ending the "us vs them" construct. The idea is growing that we're all on this journey together and that no matter where our efforts lie, we have an opportunity to be a part of this mission.

Trauma-Informed is a Love-Based Science. It is far less about *pain and hurt* and more about the science of *hope and healing*.

The other thing I have learned is that this movement is less about the kids in our schools and more about the adults. I had an amazing administrator friend, who was a year or so into her building's journey, call me and share that where things really changed for them was when they realized this really isn't about changing the kids; it's about changing us.

I work in a couple of different communities with the science of ACEs and Resilience. One is in schools with teachers. I have the opportunity to go into districts and help lead staff toward buy-in to become a trauma-informed building or district. I do this by laying the groundwork of neuroscience and the way it connects to some of our biggest challenges in our schools; the exact challenges that have us beating our heads against the wall!

I have worked with multiple districts in the state of Kansas and beyond and nearly always get to a level of 75 to 80% staff buy-in to move forward with changing practices. This is no small feat as many of our schools are experiencing *initiative fatigue* and most of our teachers simply cannot fathom the idea of *one more thing*. But they recognize that the challenges our kids are showing up with require so much more help than we currently know how to give. And truth be

told, this alone is causing a tremendous amount of secondary trauma in our educators. It feels overwhelming.

Punishment vs Discipline

Over the years I have noticed that a topic that needs some of the most ongoing care and attention in Trauma-Informed schools is around the understanding of *discipline vs punishment*.

So let's unpack this here today.

Critical stop #1 on the Trauma-Informed Journey: Punishment

A huge challenge that must be brought out into the open is our value systems in America around punishment. It is deeply rooted in who we are. Our beliefs often say, "If you did something wrong, you chose to do it and therefore we are going to motivate you to make different choices through pain and fear or isolation."

After all, it is all about choices...



In helping people see another way to address malfeasances, we often bump up against another barrier. This is what I call the "cause and effect brain" strategy. This strategy does work and it typically works quickly. What happens is that kids -- who have access to their Cause and Effect wiring -- actually do respond positively to punishment. When they mess up and they're punished, their brain says, "Let's never do that again!" Incidentally, this type of brain is also motivated through rewards.

So, we see an entire history of classroom management systems in place today that have been designed around punishment and rewards. The *reward* part of this philosophy lives out in the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) movement.

Many teachers working in these punishment/rewards systems will share how they use stickers or other small artifacts to reward kids for good behavior. Most schools report an uptick in prosocial behavior initially. But quickly, the kids who need the most support for their behaviors are back to witnessing only the “good” kids getting the stickers. This reinforces to the troubled student how short they are from the “good” mark. By the time our kids hit the older grades they’ve already learned the hard way - *There are rewards out there but I will never get them! It is just another painful reminder of how “bad” I really am.* So the reward system can begin to be perceived as a threat to students with ACEs. Incidentally, the “good” kids are also witnessing and solidifying in their minds and developing relationships- who the “bad” kids are and exactly how bad they are.

So, when a classroom or a building rolls out this type of behavior management system, it is with a certain group of kids in mind. They are seeking solutions to help *those kids make better choices and learn how to behave.* **These systems seem very logical to the adults because this is how most of them were reared.** And it was effective! Sadly, people begin to quickly realize these systems work brilliantly – on the kids that don’t need it!

And frustratingly, they seem to **make the kids that need it the most – worse.** When the program doesn’t work, do we blame the research-based program? Or the teachers for not implementing it with fidelity? Or do we blame the kids?

I have witnessed middle schools that do something called PBIS Friday. It is where one Friday a quarter, all the kids who didn’t get any office referrals or detentions get to go home after lunch. And, you guessed it! All the kids who fell into category B who did get office referrals and/or detentions, stay and work on positive behavior processes. If you hang out in these schools, you will notice by the third quarter it is mostly the same group of kids who do not get to go home early. I ask school leaders, *“Are we just rewarding the kids who have the Cause and Effect brains? The brains that wired the way they were supposed to? And aren’t we really just punishing the kids who have fight/flight/freeze brains? The brains that were wired by unbuffered adversity?”*

Let’s take a step back and move away from youth to adults.

America has 4.4% of the world's population and we house 22% of the world's prisoners. The US incarcerates at a highest level per 100,000 people in the world. You can find a [deeper dive into the research here.](#)

We also know that roughly 60% of the people released from prison this year will return within 12 months. This is called Mass Incarceration and it is failing miserably. Not only is this really expensive – it does not have enough success to call it effective!

If you're bored, here is where you can pull out a calculator and take 2,293,000 inmates in America, multiplied by \$30,000 - the rough cost to house an inmate annually. Yikes! Who pays for that? Drum roll please ... oh yea, that's you and me!

Understanding our system's current philosophy around punishment will help us understand how we got here. The system's philosophy lies in the choices narrative: *You chose to do what you did, therefore you deserve punishment to keep you from doing wrong and we'll offer rewards to get you on the right path. In this way, we'll teach you to do better.* This is B.F. Skinner Behaviorism 101. **But what people fail to understand is we are not typically dealing with "cause and effect" brains that understand the relationship between causes and effects. We are dealing with brains in "fight/flight/freeze" and this type of approach only impedes their ability to heal and become productive, whole, contributing human beings.**

Am I saying wipe out incarceration completely? Honestly, I cannot answer that in a definitive way, but I do know there is much that can be done prior to incarceration that we simply aren't doing. [More can be learned about that here in a TED talk from Adam Foss](#), former Boston prosecutor and criminal justice reform advocate.

Simply put, our grand experiment in punishment does not work.

And it has caused a very real historical trauma that affects both people of color and people experiencing poverty. [Learn more about this from a TED talk by Bryan Stevenson, human rights lawyer.](#)

I think the deeper challenge here is that many people are in a profound love affair with the narrative that says, "If I motivate you through pain I am actually helping you."

Furthermore, in schools, many teachers truly feel, if we are gentle and form a caring relationship when you screw up, then we are only encouraging bad behavior and ultimately signing you into prison. No one wants to do that to a kid. Yet, many people are alarmed at our youth today and surmise that they simply were not given enough punishment and consequences in their homes, which is why they're running wild.

But we now have brain science and brain scans that prove this theory wrong. This is the science of trauma-informed, this is the science of resilience. We have the ACEs study, which shows us that pain and neglect is REALLY bad for developing humans.

Refreshingly, Behaviorism is no longer the end-all, be-all to why children and adults act like we do, nor is it the singular road map to change it. Behaviorism is not to be totally abandoned, but it is to be understood as only a surface-level approach that truly lies in the thinking brain and not the survival brain.

What we now know is that kids who spend a lot of time in their survival brain require a connection through their relational brain (aka, co-regulation) to get back into their thinking brain. Once a student is in their thinking brain all sorts of amazing things can happen! Healing and learning being at the top of the list. Which also leads to behavior changes.

We have identified that punishment has been our most common modality for correcting behavior in our American institutions and, let's face it, inside many families as well. Once we, as a school or organization, begin to buy-in to the current, up-to-date neuroscience and theory of resilience, we quickly realize we are using punishment/rewards to try to help kids succeed. We recognize it's not working for the toughest kiddos, meaning we still aren't getting a behavior change and this group of kids are still spending a great deal of time in the office or worse, out of school for suspensions.

So if we aren't going to *punish* the kids, what the heck are we going to do?

Critical stop #2: We Can't Give Consequences to Kids with Trauma.

This is probably the number one misconception hurting this movement in schools and nothing could be further from the truth.

Kids do need boundaries to push against.

Kids do need accountability.

Kids do need to repair harm.

Kids do need safe, supportive adults to do so.

Kids do need to understand their stress response system and the way their brain works.

Kids do need to be taught strategies and a space and place to get regulated.

And as I always tell teachers, if a kid destroys a classroom or hurts someone, once that kid is calmed down and back in their thinking brain, *which could take a full 24 hours*, there *must* be a consequence.

This is perhaps the hardest part of this work, because truth be told, punitive practices are quick and take less manpower from the adults. Restorative practices take time and relationships. And those often require us to learn at least some basic skills to facilitate it effectively, which is counterintuitive to what we've previously been taught to do with kids in our pre-service training.

But here's the beauty: **It works.** It maintains relationships. Kids are still held accountable and the adults are satisfied because repair was done.

HOWEVER, too often in this movement, I see staff and administrators who experience a transformative shift in attitude and approaches, which is a good thing. But from that moment forward, they report that **they find it very difficult to discipline a student who they suspect may be experiencing a great deal of trauma. This is not a good thing.**

I work with teenagers who have high ACE scores in an alternative education center. Most of them have experienced suspensions and at times expulsions for behavior. They spend a great deal of their school day locked in fight, flight or freeze. And they are often pretty angry and have no trouble letting us know it.

We are not interested in getting them to simply *comply*. We are interested in the big work of helping them build their relationship network of safe supportive adults. This network can co-create the ability to develop their thinking brain. We are acutely focused on **sharing power with these kids and building trust. We're giving *them* the microphone to tell us what they need. To help us see life from their eyes.**

We want to grow these kids and not harm them. We want to watch them build hope and a future. This is *really* hard work as we move through the dense forest that is their well-developed defenses and essential survival systems, helping them settle into an open, sunny meadow of relationship and trust. It's hard, but it's important and sacred work where we tread carefully, but steadily.

Lastly, I think that many people think a trauma-informed school is where all the kids are meditating and the teachers are all Zen-like (cue the tinkling spa music) and we're all smiles and hugs between yoga sessions. **Nothing could be further from the truth. This work is hard. And at times, staff members revert into their own survival brain and in the moment, that's it! They've HAD it! And they end up wanting a "pound of flesh" from their kids. But after we get regulated, we go back to our core principles of trauma-informed instruction: *We know* that behavior is a brain issue and not a character issue, including our own. We also know that often, the stress for our kids is coming from outside the school and they are bringing it in with them to share around. *We know* that school *must* be a safe place where every single student matters. And we know that we are called to continue our work of educating the whole child, even in the midst of adversity.**

When our kids get dysregulated and say awful things to our staff, we are using restorative circles to repair harm and co-create consequences. The bottom line, the whole thing is messy. We embrace this mess because from this mess comes the beauty.

Furthermore, we also know that **as the adults who have the power, we must figure out how to tailor our community** to be student centric, to create meaningful and engaging coursework,

and to let kids get up and move around. We must give them choice and voice in how, what, and where they learn.

As a whole, we must also recognize the way our policies and system have been wired for families that experience economic security and tend to punish everyone else through practices and procedures and even laws. And we get the chance to rethink and rebuild our policies and practices to encompass *all* our families.

Many people are beginning to help us see that if we want to talk about Adverse Childhood Experiences and Trauma we also better become comfortable talking about the historic trauma that our system has laid across the shoulders of our most vulnerable families. Because until we are willing to wrestle with the notion that toxic stress is so much bigger than a family system, we are failing this work. Our institutions and communities must choose love as our approach to serving the many types of families that are our community.

Everything we have put into practice so far has come from [Jim Sporleder](#), the Father of the Trauma-informed schools movement. **He is teaching us to seek the root cause; to give our kids a voice; to ask and respond versus react and tell.** He has also shown us that with a trauma-informed culture in our school, we can raise math and reading scores, increase attendance, decrease office referrals and suspensions and get our kids through.

The most important lesson Jim has proved for us was that we can help explosive kids. We can build a process of love and discipline that helps them heal their brains from toxic stress, build resilience, and complete their education. Kicking them out of school is not the long-term solution. We want to keep discipline in school whenever possible.

More about Jim's work in [Implementing a Trauma-Informed school can be found here](#).

What I love most about working with Jim is that he shares that he and his staff at Lincoln High School set out to change the kids through a trauma-informed approach but instead, *the kids changed them*.

Find out about [Bridging to Resilience](#), Jim's conference in Kansas City with us.

In closing, I will say this:

A trauma-informed school is never the absence of discipline. However it is ALWAYS the absence of punishment.

Discipline is helping a child solve a problem.

Punishment is making a child suffer for having a problem.

- L.R. Knost



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