



Working with Student Emotions

Interview with Marriene Langton

Principal: Te Ara Koropiko – West Spreydon School

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[At Te Ara Koropiko, how do you manage kids with a lot of anxiety?](#)

We've always seen anxiety with children starting school (personally I feel that 5 is too young), but since starting to work with Gordon Neufeld at the Neufeld Institute many years ago, I've found the language to talk about the things I instinctively knew - about embracing the tears, acknowledging that it's a very frightening thing to leave Mummy, to leave Daddy. We have learnt to "Bridge" the home-school transition – for example, making allowances for children to bring transition toys, or love notes, or doing the magic kiss. (When you take out your lunchbox Mummy's going to be saying "I love you..." Can you see it?) Now we have children running in and saying "I saw it! I saw the kiss!"

Also we've looked at finding things that smell of the parent, it might be a "samesies" bracelet or scarf. I've also done a lot of work with parents saying "this is ok. Don't fret about it. These tears have to come. Yours have to come too. Here's some little tricks you can use to make it easier for the both of you."

Looking back now I have some of the first children I ever worked with after I worked with the Neufeld Institute who are now senior kids. One of the boys I remember hanging on to his mother's legs. He was screaming. She was sobbin like you wouldn't believe. He is now one of our school leaders.

So we do talk to the children about the treasure and the dragon – the "dragon being that it is going to take a lot of courage to do this and you are going to feel sad, and the "treasure" being how good it feels to have managed to go on a school trip and have fun with the class.

[How do you work with students who have a lot of pent up frustration that spills out in the classroom?](#)

We talk about predict and then protect.

Predict: We've done a lot of work around predicting when these sorts of outbursts are going to happen. *We ask What has happened over the weekend? When's the most likely time they're going to "go off"? Is it a pattern?, Is it around maths time, is it because the kids have been sitting around too long?*

Protect. I've done a lot of talking with teachers around being alpha. Particularly the protective part of the alpha. That "it's your job to see the dangers, to see these things coming and to take control of the situation. Because when our students feel out of control someone has to take control. Most of our teachers are fantastic with this.

For it to really work, the teachers must first have a good connection with the child. If children are defended they're not going to let on that you're getting to them. Why would they? It just feels too vulnerable.

[Do you ever use safe release techniques to help students release their emotion?](#)

We have a lot of things in place to allow for that frustration to get out in a safe way. Even though, in the past, I knew as a Principal we were putting kids into punishment for things they could not help doing, it wasn't until I found Gordon Neufeld's work that I found another way through. It seems to me that as adults we always have the licence to get frustrated, we can say rude things, we can kick the cat, but kids apparently cannot.

Now, when children get frustrated we allow them to run it off, climb, get themselves out of the classroom. They let the teacher know they can say, "I need to go, I'm not coping", or show the teacher a time-out symbol if they can't express it. Teachers keep an eye on them out the window while they're out there, letting it out.

So we have our punching bags out in the playground and our kicking bags. We also encourage children to go for a run, *but it's always our idea*. Even if they've stormed out of the classroom we say, "Good for you. I was just about to come get you and say it's time you got out. You really need a run but you've took control of it yourself. Well done!"

If they need somewhere to go, our office is usually the safe place for those children to come. So it's not uncommon for a child to just come busting in – meeting or no meeting. This is the place they need to be. It's about making the allowances.

When the language comes out I say, "Yeah I know those words too. I even know even ruder ones. The safe way is to keep them inside your head or come into our office and say them inside there because we've heard those words before. And if they're really, really rude ones, we can leave. We'll shut the door so you can say them as loud as you like and no one's going to get upset by it."

We show some children the pathway to our leadership office when they're feeling ok. When they're out of control they can't find the way. My PA used to sometimes put kids on her computer when they arrived to see me, typing up a shopping list to give them a chance to cool down before I came. Once I arrived they were calm. They'd say, "I've been helping Whaia Tricia".

For our most at risk kids - the children who get the most frustrated, the kids most likely to become aggressive - we take them out of the playground at interval and lunch time. It's about keeping them out of trouble at a time when there's no close staff supervision. We've

had a hard job convincing parents it's not punishment but it's not – it's about keeping them out of trouble.

So these children come to us – just the Senior Leadership team. We play Uno, Battleships..and whenever we can get into a hall or outside we play the roughest games you can imagine like Dodgeball – they get smacked off their feet with a ball. Then they get all set to have an argument or have a big fight and do a big “wah” then my DP is magic. He will say “Do you wanna play?” yup. Well stop your “wah’ing then get up and get back in the game.” When they lose we say “Hmmm. How does it feel to lose?” Because we know in the playground if that happened it would be a punch-up. With us it's safe and they'll laugh. “I'll get you next time” they say. I reply “Yeah bring it on kid! It will never happen!”

It's a safe contained environment then?

Yes. We set the rules and keep our lead – but it's a *caring* alpha lead. There's no negotiation about what game we're going to play. We decide and we govern everything that happens in that game. And when it's pitted against us, we play to win! They need to learn what it feels like to lose in a safe environment...and we joke: “Oh! Lost again? You can't even beat the old Principal?” They love it.

I always remember Gordon Neufeld saying to kids, “I've got a hug in me”. I can think of an example of a little boy who goes on the attack. He'll get a brick or concrete and he'll go on the attack. He's really frightening. Completely lost control. He's never hit me – he's hit everybody else. I see him coming. I stand a wee way back and put my arms out and say, “oh mate...it's just got too much again? I've got a hug in me if you need one” and he'll advance and I'll think *oh no. Today's the day...today's the day he's going to hit me*. But every time he's dropped the thing he's holding and has just come in for a hug and he's cried and cried. Poor kid...

You know it's amazing when you think in the past he would literally trash the classroom. He'd break furniture, tear things off the wall, threw furniture and so on...he can't bear to be touched, won't give eye contact, doesn't connect with his teacher and certainly not with the other children in his class. But yesterday he invited his helper to draw with him and he drew a picture of her and put a Princess Crown on her head. ...when teachers see those breakthroughs it makes up for all the tough times.

How do you deal with kids who have attention issues?

For attention issues I usually ask if the programme is actually at their level. Is it too hard, too easy? Is it interesting? I can't sit still myself. Quite frankly I'd be bored too in some classes!

I'd be asking the teachers, “What kind of things are you doing to get the kids moving?” Asking them to sit at their desk all day long is unrealistic. I can't do it myself. I need to keep moving. I advise them to regularly do some high energy games. Send them out for a run. Run them ragged, get them moving then get back to the learning. You've actually lost nothing in terms of learning because they turn off after the first 20 minutes anyway.

We acknowledge that some kids just have a “need for speed”. They’ve got to be up and moving. In Lockdown some of these kids were moving and making/ creating and doing active things at home with their parents. Schools aren’t set up well to be doing that.

Do you find parents or teachers would prefer a more punitive approach at times? How do you cope with this?

Often teachers feel they’re not being supported, and also parents feel that we’re not being punitive enough when their child has been upset. It’s a matter of walking that line to make sure the teacher’s wellbeing is kept in focus and reassuring parents that “we’ve got this”.

Sometimes we do go to a Stand down and we’ve had three exclusions in 12 years, and they make me incredibly sad. Sometimes you’ve got no choice. You’ve got to keep everyone else safe and the needs of that one child has to just drop to the bottom of the pile but we do a lot of work with the teachers.

We ask:

- What safety valves have you got?
- Have you cried your own tears yet? The ones where you realise that things just aren’t working between you and the child?

It’s about finding their resilience. Looking to another day in the classroom and finding their way back with that child. Most of them go for the win of the relationship. Most. But I admit sometimes it’s “blimmin hard”. And I admit too that sometimes you feel it in yourself...that rising of absolute frustration in yourself and you think *today’s the day for revenge! I’m going to teach you a lesson!* It never works...

What are the key ways you help staff to manage their emotions?

Firstly I want to re-iterate it’s our teachers and our teacher aides who are our heroes. They’re the ones working with these kids day in and day out. I’m one step removed. I might have the theory and the knowledge but they’re the ones who have to implement it. And a lot of it is counter-intuitive. It goes against everything they’re taught about managing children and how education should work.

I train all new staff in the Neufeld Institute course: Teachability Factor. I release them for two full days to do it. (I prefer intensive training). Understanding Emergent/ Integrative and Adaptive functioning and that our education system is predicated upon these functions, you look at them and realise *No! these kids haven’t got that level of developmental maturity. How can we assume that of them?*

We then revisit these Neufeld Institute ideas throughout the year. I use laminated cards with sayings on them. For example one says, “You are better than this” so instead of teachers saying “I’m sick of you and your behaviour you little ratbag” I say, “Your head is telling you pay them back, to hurt them when they hurt you but the language that comes out to your kids even if we don’t feel it is, “You are better than this”.

These kids actually already know they've let you down. They've let the school down, and in actual fact who cares? That's the least of their problems. (These kids have a lot more problems going on for them at home than you or I know about). All you need to say is "You're better than this. This was a bit of an 'oopsie daisy' today and we can fix it."

The challenge is to still do it when you're really ticked off and you've had a guts-full.

How do teachers find this kind of approach?

Teachers do find it taxing/ challenging / frustrating and complex to manage attention and behaviour issues, but when there's a breakthrough you want to hear the talk. Walk into the classroom and you hear them say "I had such a breakthrough with x today! They ran in the door and gave me a hug." I love hearing these stories from teachers.

It *is hard* when a teacher has 24 other kids in the class and they're being asked to be understanding about this one child. I get it...I know sometimes teachers might have had a frustrating day and think, "Well what the hell's she doing?" when they see me connecting with the child they just sent across to me. They're thinking, "He actually deserves a good 'touch up the rudder'".

But when teachers say it's so unfair giving one child all that attention I talk about equity not equality. I think if you understand the heart connection it makes more sense. All of us need different things at different times. For example, if I were taking art lessons, you would have to spend 7 or 8x as long to get me to a basic level as you would with everybody else. Some children are at a developmental level where they *need more*. If you think "fair" it doesn't make sense. But if you think long term ...it starts to make sense.

When teachers see those tiny little break-throughs they get so excited about it. I've got an amazing support worker who is SWIS worker (Social Worker in School). She works 15 hours a week helping with learning and also has fun with the kids. As a result she gets breakthroughs. Yesterday she and another teacher came in and said "Johnny did a belly laugh today." He's been at our school for 5 years and I've never ever heard him laugh. He's one of the saddest little kids I know. He's had a number of attempts at suicide and yet they got a belly laugh out of him yesterday.

The teachers here, they're looking for those relational wins. I tell them, it's the Season Finale we're focussing on, not the weekly matches. When they do get the breakthrough it's just spectacular.