



JPA Helps Teachers Connect with Their Students

“It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.” — Frederick Douglass

Experienced teachers, especially in public schools where resources are often scarce, know working with a classroom of thirty or more students means dealing not only with the academic demands of the subject but also with each child’s behavior, outlook, and sometimes, severe trauma. As one teacher put it, “You’re not just with your class for fifty minutes, you’re with each student times fifty minutes. When some are trying to cope with homelessness, witnessing a crime, hunger, or physical/emotional abuse, it’s almost impossible to help them focus. They need more than I can give them myself in that time.”

In a word, teachers are often the front line for students going through difficult times. For younger students, not yet able to use coping mechanisms, teachers can become lightning rods for their sadness, fear, and anger. They transfer their feelings to the person they see every day. Teachers then experience their students’ symptoms, becoming parents, nurses, or even grandparents in their students’ eyes. The pressure can be enormous; teachers may want to help but have to balance their teaching responsibilities with maintaining a healthy classroom environment.

JPA’s therapists help teachers understand how trauma affects their students’ lives and gives them tools to deal with it. In teacher group meetings, JPA therapists lead discussions about the difficulties they have, validating their feelings. They encourage teachers to see why a child’s behavior isn’t personal but often the product of “transference”: The child sees the teacher as representative of whatever is going on in his or her life. Teacher consultations about individual clients help them develop empathy for each child as well as methods to help them.

One first grade client had witnessed a murder in his home. His response in school was to destroy bulletin boards or any other “nice” things. Instead of merely punishing the behavior, JPA worked with the teacher to discover what was behind it. Doing so enabled both parties to communicate; the teacher realized her student was asking for help; that opened up lines of communication that helped her help that student work through his trauma.

Sometimes, students may not do homework because they had no place to sleep or had had nothing to eat the night before. They may be carrying invisible burdens expressed negatively; they become a problem for the whole classroom. Cultivating empathy and healthy alternatives are JPA goals.

Courtney Fischer, Bevin Merbach, and other JPA staff therapists work with teachers in the public schools, giving them the opportunity to share their concerns in a non-judgmental space. They know teachers often feel burned out after as little as three years because of the intensity of their students' lives. By helping them reflect on and understand students' various traumas and how they might express themselves, JPA provides an outlet for constructive conversation and a

resource for ideas they can use in the classroom.

One effective method for working with traumatized students is the individualized "Morning Check-In" sheet. Students fill it out and give it to the teacher at the beginning of the day to let her in on what they're feeling. That way, teacher and student can start the day communicating with each other and anticipating what's needed. It looks something like this:

DANTE'S MORNING CHECK-IN

This morning I am FEELING (*Circle One*):

Awesome	Excited	Happy	Relaxed	Annoyed	Confused
Sad	Mad	Frustrated	Tired	Stressed	Distracted
Hungry	Disappointed	Angry	Hurt	Worried	Scared

One COPING skill I can try TODAY is (*Circle One*):

5 Deep Breaths	Get a Drink	Write It Out	Draw It Out
Count to Ten	Tell a Friend/Teacher Ask for Help		

One thing Ms. Barber can do to HELP me today is: _____

Since it's often difficult for young children to express themselves verbally, indicating their feelings on this sheet encourages them to be honest and to communicate confidentially with their teacher. It establishes a bond: Students feel they're being heard, and teachers can respond to their requests for help, which has decreased the frequency of externalizing behaviors.

While students carry the primary burden of the traumas they experience, teachers also must bear the repercussions. JPA provides tools

enabling everyone to focus on teaching and learning. Ultimately, we help students heal so they can concentrate on validation and coping, which promote growth into strong, confident adulthood.

JPA