

## How to Support Your Lion in a School Full of Ducks©



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Parents of children with attachment trauma eventually come to realize that their children are not like other children. Children with attachment trauma often have difficulty bonding with their parents. They struggle with peer relationships. And many have difficulties learning. For the most part, however, children with attachment trauma start their educational journey in a public school system. Parents of five year olds with attachment trauma across the country, send their children off to kindergarten with neat new clothes, colorful lunchboxes full of nutritional foods, and hearts full of hope and expectation. Sooner or later, however, parents and teachers realize that children with attachment trauma, who look just like all the other children in the class, do not act like all the other children in the class. They can behave aggressively. They might tantrum, upset furniture, destroy materials, lie, steal, or simply withdraw completely. They do not respond to instructional strategies in a typical way. Parents respond by feeling embarrassed, scared for their child's future, frustrated, and then, usually, angry. Teachers respond by feeling frustrated and impotent.

An understanding of the biophysical and neurological impact of attachment trauma on brain development is relatively new. Programs to promote emotional regulation and academic progress for these children in schools are in their infancy. Thus, for now, it falls on parents to educate the schools on their child's needs. Before going into the school to advocate for their children, parents need to know three important things. First parents need to know why their child is struggling with behavior and/or academic progress. Next they need to understand some of the things that can be done in schools to support their children. Finally, they need to understand how to work with teachers to support the behavioral and learning needs of their children.

## **Why is your child with attachment trauma struggling in school?**

Physically abused children, sexually abused children, children of neglect, children in foster care, and many adopted children suffer similar impairments to brain development. Early trauma or separation from a primary caregiver causes the brain to release a toxic amount of stress hormones. The constant exposure to toxic levels of stress hormones impairs development of the limbic system. The limbic system, including the amygdala, the hippocampus, and the prefrontal cortex, are responsible for language development, cognitive processing, executive function, memory, and emotional regulation. As a result of impaired limbic system development, children with attachment trauma cannot regulate their emotions.

Their failed ability to form meaningful attachments makes it very difficult for them to feel safe. They demonstrate hypervigilance and hyperarousal because they are constantly on the lookout for threats to their survival. As a result, they have trouble regulating their behavior and learning in school. Many struggle with attention. Others might demonstrate hyperactivity. In addition, the barrage of toxic hormones often impairs memory and language development so they appear to not understand what the teacher says. Struggles with learning to read are common.

Schools are all about relationships -relationships with classmates and relationships with teachers. The process of establishing relationships is so difficult for children with attachment trauma that they become overwhelmed. In response they act out, shut down, or give up. They are often consumed with helplessness. Thus, they do not believe that they can be effective learners. They fail to complete or in some cases even start an assignment that they perceive to be too difficult.

## **Strategies for promoting success in school.**

Children with attachment trauma need two things to be successful in school; they need to feel safe so that they can establish trusting relationships, and they need to believe they can learn (also known as self-efficacy). Before they fill their shiny new attachment trauma toolbox with strategies, however, teachers need to understand that while children with attachment trauma might look like other children, and even demonstrate behaviors teachers have seen before in their classroom, they are not the same as other children.

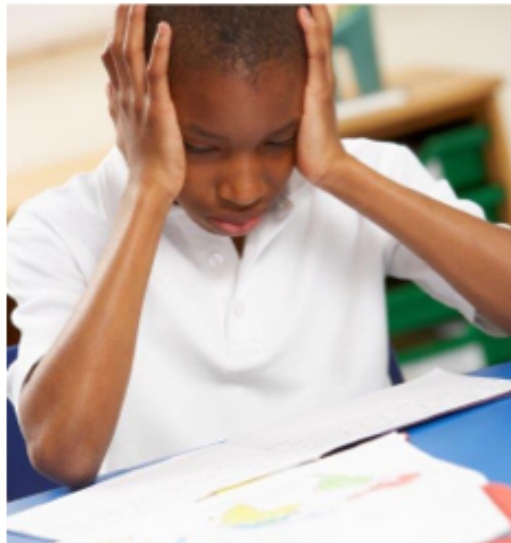
Children with attachment trauma walk like ducks and talk like ducks, but they are actually lions. Teachers need to be open to the idea that they are dealing with a completely different animal. What looks like an inability to pay attention is really hypervigilance. What looks like hyperactivity is really hyperarousal. What looks like an inability to follow directions is really a language processing and/or memory issue.

Once they accept that they are dealing with lions and not ducks, there are many things that teachers can do to help children with attachment trauma feel safe in

their classroom. Teachers need to check their luggage at the door. They need to identify their own attachment style. How do they naturally engage with their students? What are the behaviors that most disturb them? By becoming aware of what they bring to their relationship with students, they can better regulate their emotions and responses to children with attachment trauma. Responding with a neutral tone is absolutely essential when developing a trusting relationship with lions.

Lions need time in, not time out. Time out is another form of abandonment. Children with attachment trauma who are behaving in an unacceptable manner need the teacher to spend time with the child helping him/her work through the difficulty. Lions do not respond well to discipline. They need a quiet and safe place to understand what went wrong and they need an opportunity to fix what they broke (literally or figuratively). This cuts down on their overwhelming sense of worthlessness and hopelessness. Fixing what they broke helps lions take responsibility for what they have done and helps them develop a sense of efficacy.

Strategies for developing self efficacy include but are certainly not limited to; allowing lions to work in pairs until they are comfortable before moving to larger cooperative groups, modifying classwork to increase the likelihood of successful completion, and abstainin from the assignment of homework in cases where lions are using that practice to manipulate their teachers and/or parents. Homework should also not be assigned until a lion has developed enough self-efficacy that they believe they can accomplish the task.



## Working with Teachers

There are five basic suggestions for parents when sharing information with teachers about the care and feeding of lions in school:

#1 – **Be a knowledgeable advocate.** Parents need to educate themselves on the impact of attachment trauma on the development of their children. An advanced degree in attachment theory is not required, however, a basic understanding of the difference between ducks and lions is helpful.

#2 – **Check your luggage at the door.** Our children are the single most important things in our lives. So when a teacher implies in an email that the child is choosing not to follow directions or doesn't want to pay attention, we can't help but take it personally. We need to check our luggage at the door before replying to an email. Most teachers don't want to hurt your feelings. They want your child to be a phenomenal success and they are frustrated when all the things they have been taught to do don't work. Their lack of knowledge about lions is not meant as a slight against your child. Recognize your own emotions and put them aside so that you can be an objective and positive member of the team. You have to learn to check your luggage so teachers can follow your example.

#3 – **Be a translator for your child.** You are fluent in lion. Teachers have all been trained in duck. Ask the teacher to give an example of a challenging behavior or learning struggle. Then translate the incident so that the teacher can see how your child heard/felt/saw the incident. Help them use all of the excellent knowledge they have about teaching ducks and adjust it to fit the needs of your lion.

#4 – **Find common ground.** You and your child's teacher want the same thing. You both want your child to behave appropriately and achieve academically. Before you meet with your child's teacher, make a list of your questions or concerns. Approach the table with the understanding that you want to work together with the teacher to support your child.

#5 – **Accept Approximation.** Learning a new language or way of doing things takes time. Be patient. Celebrate the small victories. Understand that some teachers need to have your lion's behavior translated more than once before they start to see it as different than ducks.

And finally, know when to ask for help. If you have done all of the above to the very best of your ability, then find someone else to help you. Maybe your child needs a change in teacher. Maybe your child needs a 504 plan or an IEP to assure that the right academic and/ or behavioral supports are being put in place. Children with attachment trauma can and will learn and behave. They just need parents and teachers who recognize their unique needs and who are willing and able to work together to develop creative strategies to meet their needs.

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