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Wellbeing Notebook: Time-in or Time-out? Dealing with Stress-related Reactions of Indigenous Students

Joyanne Walsh

Port Macquarie Adventist School, principal@portmacquarie.adventist.edu.au

Beverly Christian

Avondale College of Higher Education, bev.christian@avondale.edu.au

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Time-in or time-out? Dealing with stress-related reactions of indigenous students

Joyanne Walsh

Port Macquarie Adventist School
principal@portmacquarie.adventist.edu.au

with

Beverly J. Christian

Avondale College of Higher Education
bev.christian@avondale.edu.au

Working for the wellbeing of indigenous students can be challenging, especially when a difficult home or school situation rouses them emotionally to the extent that it impacts their capacity to engage in learning and/or appropriate social behaviour. Joyanne Walsh, who has worked with indigenous children in her previous school as Dean of Student Wellbeing, and current school as Principal has found that the concept of ‘time-in’ works well.

Most schools are familiar with the concept of time out. With time-out, children are given time alone to think through their actions. “Time-in really is the opposite of time-out,” says Walsh. Instead of isolating the child, he or she is invited to spend time with a trusted adult with the express purpose of helping them regulate their body. This then allows them to deal with issues causing the stress in a positive and rational manner. It’s about saying, “Come here. Let’s regulate your body. Let’s get your physical body calm, and then let’s talk through the process of what occurred,” says Joyanne who also uses several strategies prior to the time-in strategy to enable the best possible outcome. Some of the strategies she uses come from the Berry Street Educational Model (<https://www.childhoodinstitute.org.au/focus-areas/berry-street-education-model>), an organisation committed to the wellbeing of children and adolescents suffering from chronic stress or

trauma.

First, says Joyanne, “I build trust through relationships.” This can be a slow process and requires making time to get to know the child, and more importantly, for the child to become comfortable with the support adult. This process is best built with indigenous students through connection to family members. If the teacher or support adult knows mum, aunty, grandparent or uncle, this creates a sense of belonging and a safe place for the child. From this safe place, a relationship is more easily established.

Second, Joyanne teaches children how their brain functions in conjunction with their emotions and their body. This involves a basic understanding of the limbic system and the role of the amygdala in moderating emotions. The students learn what is going on inside their body; the things beneath the surface that no one can see. This may be, among other things, an accelerated heartbeat or a prickly sensation. Knowing the basics of brain function and physiology helps students understand why there are experiencing these biological responses. Once a child has this basic understanding, Joyanne is in a position to say to the child, “You just had an amygdala high jacking,” rather than, “you just had an explosion.” This no-blame statement allows the child to process that physical sensations are the body’s response to stress. This knowledge is more likely to result in acceptance by the child that he or she needs help and therefore a willingness to have some time-in.

While time-out is an accepted strategy used widely in schools, time-in appears to work better for indigenous children because time-in happens in community. This is very important for indigenous students. Leaving them alone to think about their behaviour does not help them regulate their physical state. Being with someone else who is calm and is prepared to wait is a better option.

Once the time-in session has begun, Joyanne uses strategies to help the children regulate their body. Physical activity such as running is useful, so are repetitive physical

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Figure 1: Melissa Garlick interacts with a primary school student Mahteece Holten at Kempsey Adventist School. Photography: NNSW Adventist Education image bank.

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actions such as bouncing a ball. The wellbeing space at the school where Joyanne worked as Dean of Student Wellbeing had rocking chairs for that purpose. Sometimes Joyanne uses weighted blankets to help regulate the physical symptoms of stress. The wellbeing room offers a calming, non-judgemental space. Joyanne adds, that on occasions, some children will arrive at school in high states of stress saying as they get off the bus, “I can’t go to school. I have to go to wellbeing.”

At the school where Joyanne worked as Dean of Student Wellbeing, indigenous students were learning to value rather than resent time spent with the wellbeing team, and knew they would find someone there they could trust. Once the physical distress was alleviated, Joyanne says, the students were more ready to talk through their situation. This meant that entry or re-entry time into the classroom was reduced. Although these strategies apply to any child who is distressed to the point of experiencing physical reactions, it is important to note that time-in works best when a relationship of trust has been built. Strategies are useful, but wellbeing is something that needs to be built into the culture of the school,

and building healthy relationships is a part of building a healthy school culture. [TEACH](#)

Author information

Joyanne Walsh was born and bred in Port Macquarie, and returned in 2019 as principal of the Port Macquarie Adventist school. She has 23 years’ teaching experience, having spent the last 14 years in a variety of roles at Kempsey Adventist School from teacher to school coordinator, deputy principal, and most recently, the dean of student wellbeing. Joyanne enjoys discovering how each child learns best. “I have a passion for kids having opportunities to learn in different ways—children learning beyond what they think they are capable of.”

Beverly Christian is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education, Business and Science at Avondale College of Higher Education in New South Wales Australia. Her specialty area is classroom pedagogy and professional development. Her research interests include school culture and ethos, pedagogical approaches to learning and the role of nature in well-being.