Help Your Child Be a Positive Influence for a Challenging Classmate

Michael is a 3rd grader who is often “out of control” at his new school. He screams, curses, threatens classmates and will sometimes hit, he tears up others’ work and steals their food. His classmate Sam complains to his mom and she encourages Sam to avoid Michael and to fight back if he’s aggressive. Sound reasonable? Would you think differently if you knew Michael had witnessed domestic violence and was physically and emotionally abused from birth to age 7 and has lived with two different foster families in the last 18 months?

About 1 in 4 children will experience a traumatic event before the age of 16. For those that have experienced chronic trauma, as is often the case with foster children who have been separated from their birth family, the result can be social, psychological, cognitive and biological issues, including difficulty regulating emotions, paying attention and forming relationships. When a child has lived in a constant state of fear, the amygdala (the brain’s regulator of emotions) can overdevelop, making children highly impulsive and reactive.

But children are resilient and with new, positive experiences, a child’s brain can reorganize, and schools and communities using a trauma-informed perspective can have a profound impact on that healing. LCFS provides these tips to help your family be part of the solution:

- Children have a right to privacy so you may not be given any information about a disruptive child’s background. Respect that privacy and react with the assumption that a child acting out is scared, not “bad.”
- Listen to your child and ask questions about how his classmate might be feeling. Your child will feel in control and develop empathy when you discuss options for what to do when a peer acts out. Ask what he would want classmates to do if he felt scared or hurt. Empathetic children have better relationships and do better in school.
- Many schools have embraced Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs that aim to make every child feel welcome, safe and accepted. Children who’ve experienced trauma often feel ashamed and judged at school. Reinforce SEL lessons at home to help your child interact positively with all his peers.
- Children who’ve experienced trauma have lost control in many areas of life, so encourage your child to offer his peer choices such as the activity at recess or where to sit at lunch.
- Know that teachers have to be particularly sensitive when reprimanding students and an appropriate punishment for your child may be a trigger for a child who has experienced trauma. Acknowledge teachers’ compassion and patience and be supportive.
- Guide your child to look for his peer’s strengths and offer genuine compliments when his peer does good things. Your child doesn’t need to invite a child he doesn’t like over to play, but if his peer is a soccer player, he could ask him to join his soccer team. Helping a child who has gotten too many negative messages identify what he is good at is rewarding for all.