

Tenet #6: Be Courageously Patient.

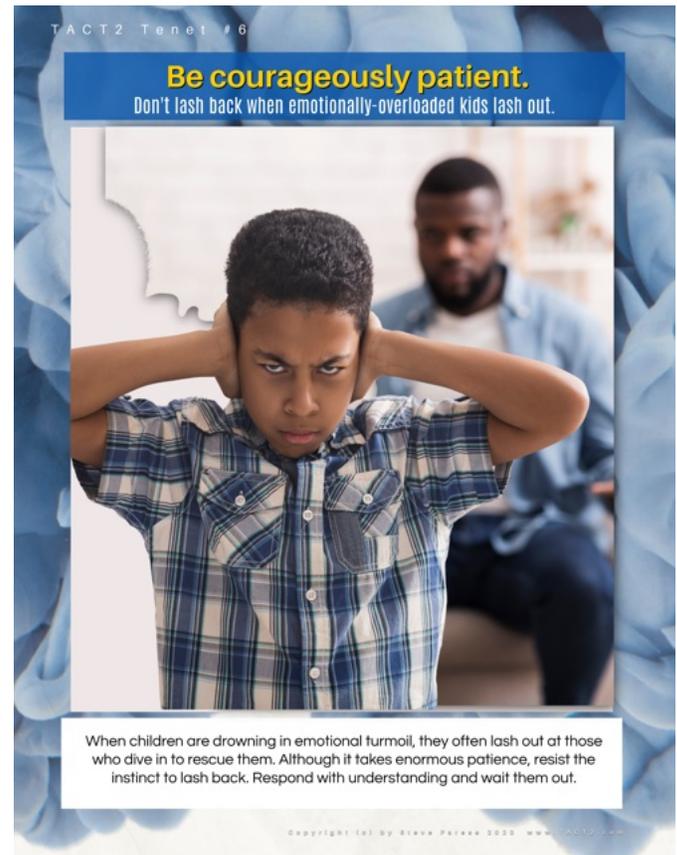
The Deeper Cut:

The phrase “courageous patience” comes from Dr. Sandra Bloom’s work in creating sanctuary for people who have been through trauma. It reminds us about the importance (and difficulty) of calm patience when working with children and youth who have experienced abuse or neglect.

Picture a 10-year-old boy on a beach vacation, bobbing happily in the ocean 50 feet from shore. Suddenly, an unexpected wave crashes over him, driving him under. When he resurfaces, he is flailing wildly, coughing saltwater, forgetting everything he’s learned about how to swim. You race into the water to rescue him, rushing to reach him before another large wave can strike. Even though you call out reassuringly, he continues to panic. The moment you are within reach, he instinctively grabs for you, accidentally punching you in the face. Would you punch him back? Shove him away? Let him go under to teach him to be more appreciative? Of course not!

Trauma-Exposed Kids

The same reasoning applies when we find ourselves on the receiving end of abusive treatment by trauma-exposed kids. Trauma occurs when events or conditions completely overwhelm a person's ability to cope, often leaving long-lasting emotional, behavioral, and psychological effects. When children endure physical, emotional, or sexual abuse or neglect, or when they are exposed again and again to frightening circumstances, they may become highly sensitized to certain triggers. Some of these may be physical (e.g., growling dog) or



sensory (e.g., smell of stale tobacco), but many triggers are emotional (e.g., feeling of humiliation after failing a test, or of rejection after peer mockery).

Such incidents might be scary, unpleasant, or hurtful to any child, but in one who has experienced prior trauma, they are highly amplified. They trigger not fear, but terror; not distaste, but horror; not momentary embarrassment, but complete self-denigration.

Depending upon personality and environmental factors, some children and youth tend to externalize these overwhelming feelings, whereas others tend to internalize them instead. Externalizers often lean toward explosive anger (lashing out, threatening others, defying adults, and destroying property). Internalizers lean toward either implosive anxiety (crying hysterically, demanding help, panicking) or

depression (shutting down, running away, harming themselves).

Without an understanding of trauma, it is tempting to use behavioral strategies such as negative consequences to discourage this aggression, refusal, or withdrawal. We tell ourselves that giving them attention only reinforces their actions — and that might be true if the behavior was deliberate. But because their behavior is driven by irrational emotions rather than deliberate intent, our punishment only feeds their sense of shame, unworthiness or fear, and exacerbates their self-destructive behavior.

Using Courageous Patience

When behaviors are linked to trauma, the right answer is not punishment, but "courageous patience."

We understand that the drowning 10-year-old's punch was driven by panic, not malice. Although it hurts, we ignore the pain. We take a deep breath and wait for the right moment to attempt a rescue. We don't use this time to require an apology, lecture about responsibility, or provide swimming lessons. Right now, his survival is more important than anything else; lectures and lessons can wait until we return safely to shore.

Similarly, when trauma-exposed children overreact to perceived humiliation or rejection with overwhelming anger or anxiety, we must accept that their disrespectfulness or lack of cooperation is not about us. We may have accidentally triggered the problem, but we didn't actually cause it. Their emotional flood couldn't possibly be all about a simple comment

or request! Clearly, there's something much deeper going on here.

With that important insight, we can be courageously patient. We can allow a child time and space to calm down without requiring instant accountability or demanding an immediate apology. All of that can wait until the emotional wave subsides.

Summary: Children who have been exposed to trauma are sometimes altered by their experiences, and become highly sensitized to certain stressful events. When triggered, these young people may overreact irrationally, their emotions greatly amplified. Some externalize their feelings as angry aggression toward adults, peers, and property. Others internalize as either anxious melt-downs or depressed shut-downs.

At times like these, desperate children need adults who have the courageous patience to wait them out and respond calmly during their most vulnerable moments.

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