

Working out the why: Addressing the unmet needs of children who are experiencing school attendance difficulties

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Vicki Mansfield (00:00:02):

Welcome everyone. I'm Vicki Mansfield, a Practise Development Officer with Emerging Minds, and welcome to our webinar tonight on working out the why addressing the unmet needs of children who are experiencing school attendance difficulties. Thank you everybody for being here tonight. It's great to have everybody attending this evening. I'll just go to next slide. Next slide. And before we start, I'd like to acknowledge that I'm meeting on Awabakal country tonight, and I'd like to acknowledge all the traditional owners of the country throughout Australia and recognise the continuing connection to lands, waters, and communities and pay my respects to elders past and present and acknowledge the memories, traditions, cultures, and hopes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. And feel free to acknowledge in the chat what country you're meeting from tonight, and I just want to acknowledge the importance of connection to culture and community for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. Next slide. So we have a fantastic panel tonight and it is going to be a great webinar and we have a really great transdisciplinary perspective. And so I'll introduce each of our panellists tonight. There are bios in the resources section on the webinar, which we can direct you to in a minute. But to kick us off, I'd like to introduce each of the panellists. And first of all, I'd welcome Deborah Costa, psychologist from New South Wales. Welcome, Deb.

Deborah Costa (00:01:43):

Thank you. Thanks very much Vicki.

Vicki Mansfield (00:01:45):

And Deb, I'll just ask you, just so we get a little insight into each of you this evening, can you tell us three adjectives that describe how you feel about working with children?

Deborah Costa (00:01:59):

Yes, thank you. Great question. My three adjectives are I find it rewarding working with children, demanding because they really demand all of our attention. And from that I find it really energising working with children.

Vicki Mansfield (00:02:14):

Yeah, lovely. And I think they definitely, definitely keep us on our toes in a good way.

Deborah Costa (00:02:21):

Absolutely.

Vicki Mansfield (00:02:23):

Thanks Deb. And then I'd like to introduce Wendy Noble, who's a paediatric occupational therapist. Welcome Wendy.

Wendy Noble (00:02:31):

Hi Vicky. Thanks for having me.

Vicki Mansfield (00:02:34):

It's lovely to have you. And Wendy, similar to Deb, can you tell us three adjectives that describe how you feel about working with children?

Wendy Noble (00:02:44):

Yeah, sure. I actually had exactly the same adjective as Deb for one of them, rewarding. That was my first thing that came to mind. It is very rewarding. I also had fun and challenging and I would say in equal measure at all times, challenging, fun, rewarding every session, every day.

Vicki Mansfield (00:03:01):

Yeah, great. And certainly that fun and playfulness was certainly a favourite thing about working with kids when I was working with children as well. And finally I'd really warm welcome to Tammy Sinclair, who's child and family partner and welcome Tammy. Tammy has recently featured in our Working with Families in Neuro Affirming Ways Course. So nice to see you this evening. Tammy.

Tammie Sinclair (00:03:27):

Thanks

Vicki Mansfield (00:03:27):

For having

Tammie Sinclair (00:03:28):

Me.

Vicki Mansfield (00:03:29):

And Tammy, a slightly different version of the question for you, Tammy, what's something your children have taught you?

Tammie Sinclair (00:03:39):

So many things, but to summarise, I'd say to think flexibly and be able to adapt to changes. And the big one is understanding myself more as well.

Vicki Mansfield (00:03:51):

Yeah, they're like holding a mirror up to ourselves sometimes, aren't they? Even when we don't want to look in the mirror sometimes.

(00:04:00):

Okay. So some housekeeping before we launch into hearing from our panellists. So this is our seventh season of Emerging Minds and Mental Health Professional Networks webinars, and this one is our fifth this season. And so we have some previous webinars that are available on our sites. And then we have a webinar coming up next month as well. So you can subscribe at the address there at the bottom of that slide if you are wanting to receive updates on webinars. And next slide. So how to use the platform. So there's a few things that you can interact with the View supporting resources, we'll have the case study, the slides from this evening and the panel bios. So feel free to pop into that button, which is just under the video panel to access resources. And you can pop in and have a look at the case study. If you want to read up on Lana, who is our case study and her aunt Melody, we also have a live chat. So to open the audience chat box, click on the icon located in the top right hand corner of your screen and you can put in questions there or engage with each other as we progress through the webinar. Yeah, those facilities are there for us throughout the evening.

(00:05:31):

So our learning outcomes this evening you will have received when you registered, but this evening we'll be looking at certainly the why and exploring the reasons around children's school challenges. We'll be looking at some trauma-informed strategies to support children and the unique factors which might contribute to challenges with school attendance and also the importance of partnerships between health providers and educators when we are looking to treat the whole child and support the whole child and family in the school environment. So lots of great information coming up around those learning outcomes. So we'll go to next slide. And so to start us off this evening, I'd like to invite Tammy to come and share her perspective. Welcome back, Tammy.

Tammie Sinclair (00:06:28):

Thank you. Yep. So I'm here to give you a voice of someone who's lived through this and you can go to the next slide if you like. So I'm a parent of two neurodivergent kids. Firstly I should say that I'm coming to you from Ghana country tonight. So yeah, parent to two neurodivergent kids. I've led a social enterprise, I've mentored families and young people. I've been a counsellor in my local government. I've written a children's book on neurodiversity and the pictures from that you'll see in the slides tonight, they fit quite well. I'm passionate about doing my small part to try and help improve outcomes for people like me and my family. Looking back, I knew I had school anxiety when I was young, but I didn't know that it would impact me for the rest of my life. Unfortunately, I still have nightmares to this day in my late thirties.

(00:07:25):

But yeah, I'm not a psychologist or a therapist. I just wanted to share my personal story and some examples to help give some context. You can go to the next slide. So I had like to start by sharing a quote from Dr. Ross. Green children do well if they can. Often when a child is experiencing difficulty with going to school, it's met with these sort of ideas that they're refusing or they're defiant or they're avoiding, which is usually met with frustration and often discipline. So if a child is struggling,

for example, my youngest have lost count of how many times he has been suspended for having natural reactions to the overwhelm that he was experiencing. Whereas if we look at it from another angle of they can't actually go at the moment because they're in distress and that something is wrong underlying everything, there's something wrong and instead we should look at that with curiosity and meet them with support. So you can go to the next slide.

(00:08:35):

So I am just taking a look here at the different layers that might add to overload and particularly looking at Lana's story in the case study, she's lost her mother, so obviously she's going to have some grief and no doubt, sadness and fear and loneliness and anxiety. But the other things to consider as well, and from my perspective, this is what I've experienced with my kids, sensory overwhelm, social disconnect, learning differences, differences in the way the executive functioning happens and change. So again, for Lana, there's been a lot of change in her life in a short period. So these are just different layers that might be adding to her experience. Next slide.

(00:09:24):

So I've seen all of these firsthand with my kids and it was only after some really big struggles that we figured out what was actually going on. The things on the right were quite obvious and led to a few diagnoses of being neurodivergent. So autism and A DHD are the ones that we've all been assigned, but the ones on the left there are more about the internal experience and it's hard for a kid to express those things and they quite often, they mirror each other. So it's hard to distinguish for a therapist or it's just hard to know what's going on.

(00:10:09):

So yeah, in my own experience, I was diagnosed in my mid thirties with autism and A DHD after years of not really knowing why everything was just so hard, I wish that I had known sooner about what was going on and it might have meant that I didn't come with that trauma diagnosis as well. That was also one of 'em. So what I really don't want is for my kids to go through those things and end up with that trauma diagnosis as well. So that's my biggest driver really with my parenting journey is to stop that cycle and hopefully skip the trauma for them. So next slide.

(00:10:57):

So without support and understanding for those different overloads that are happening, school becomes quite an impossible ask all of these things on the screen I've gone through with my children and myself. Unfortunately the last one is quite scary as a parent, when you have a child or a young person talking about these things and having to send your child to the hospital and things like that, it's not very nice. So if you're at a point where you are having to force your child out of the car at school kicking and screaming, it's a pretty big sign that they're in distress. As a parent as well, it's quite heartbreaking and exhausting. You feel like you are angry, you're overwhelmed, but you also feel this sense of guilt that you haven't done the right thing and you've got the school system, the different systems telling you that you just need to do this, do that, and it feels like they're saying just do better, but we're already doing our best.

(00:12:08):

So it, yeah, it just leads to these feelings that are hard to describe but maybe emotionally flooded. And then also not being able to function as a family. Eventually I had to leave my job because the

calls to come and pick up my child were just too frequent and it just wasn't fair. So yeah, ultimately it's not about looking at it as defiance, it's looking at it as distress. The problem has never been a lack of will or want. It's more so a lack of capacity. So next slide please. So what I've learned along the way is that we needed a affirming support approach. So not looking at things like behaviour behaviours or forcing compliance. So looking at Lana's story, it talks about she's seeing a therapist for social skills, but what does that actually mean? What are they working on? I've learned to trust my gut and do what I know is right for my child in order to protect their mental health and pick my battles.

(00:13:26):

I try and look at my children through their own lens now because I know what that internal experience is like and it comes at such a cost to the mental health to force something that doesn't feel natural if the child is already dysregulating, pushing harder only makes it worse. So looking at things like mental health days as an okay thing to do, sometimes my kids have just needed a break to sort of regulate again and try again. But there have been times long periods of times actually where school hasn't happened for a year or more, but then after that period they come back, they bounce back and they're ready to go again. So yeah, thinking about a affirming therapist, and I guess neuro affirming practise is grounded in things like the social and human rights model of disability as well as a trauma-informed approach and strengths-based person-centered.

(00:14:35):

So finding people to work with who use that approach have been invaluable. So looking at counselling for a parent has been quite useful to give me the skills to know how to parent my child. They spend half their time at school and half their time at home. So looking at upskilling, the people around the child has been incredibly helpful and yet they've taught me a whole new level of patience that I didn't think I was capable of, nor emotional regulation. So I used to fly off the handle and yell and just do this, do that, but it doesn't work. So I've learned to pause and take a deep breath and calmly respond and usually the escalation goes down and just that space to think about what's actually happening in their minds at the moment. And yeah, thinking about the whole flipping the lid thing, if the lids flipped, it's not the right time.

(00:15:45):

So having that knowledge of how the brain works has actually been really, really useful. And then being open to other options, it's not easy to think about changing schools or potentially even homeschooling. It's not ideal by any stretch. It's not ideal because we've all got jobs and things that we need to get to. But at the end of the day, at least considering them and weighing up the pros and cons and looking at another school, if the one they're at is not the right fit isn't a bad thing. So it's not a failure if that happens. Sometimes the school isn't the right fit and that's okay. But the main point I wanted to say is that recovery is possible. And when I say recovery, it's not recovery from their diagnosis, it's recovery from those things on the left that we spoke about earlier. So the mental health toll, I suppose it might look different, life might look different than what I expected, but it is better. We are all happier and most importantly, my kids are starting to talk about their feelings, which is quite a huge step forward because they were quite closed off before. So yeah, it's just been a huge shift to look at things from their lens rather than mine.

(00:17:13):

So yeah, that's time for the next slide I think, which is the end. Thank you. Mine was quite a short one, but yeah, thank you for listening to me.

Vicki Mansfield (00:17:24):

Thank you so much, Tammy. And there's so many important messages there that I heard you say, and I really loved that upskilling the people around them, and that's such a lovely message around the importance of advocacy, but also the importance of how it impacts on parents and having compassion and finding the right people around for support for parents as well sound

Tammie Sinclair (00:17:50):

And building that team around the whole family because it's a whole family experience really. Yeah.

Vicki Mansfield (00:17:56):

Yeah. Thank you. That's fantastic, Tammy, that's really great to hear from your lived experience and we really appreciate it. And so I'll ask Deb to come in and share with us her perspective as a psychologist. Welcome back Deb.

Deborah Costa (00:18:20):

Thank you so much Vicki. And it's great to be here. And I'm coming here tonight from beautiful or Wale country in Lake Macquarie, new South Wales. And as Vicki was saying, I wanted to really bring a psychologist perspective to thinking about how we would support Lanie. And I know myself, I would love to have the opportunity to work with Lanie. She sounds like she has many strengths and the wonderful opportunities to work with her and support her. So just sort of building on the back of Tammy's beautiful presentation where she raised so many wonderful points from her perspective was really powerful. So I wanted to start with a bit of just a bit of a mapping of Lonnie's, Lana's developmental context and consideration. So when we think about her presentation and the information that we've been given for tonight, we have certain bits of information.

(00:19:14):

So how might we be able to think, as Tammy said, looking at it through Lana's lens and her experience and what she's brought to her in a phrase that I will call school readiness. So we think about all of our little people start school around about the ages of five or six and what is it that they've been doing in that period of time up until starting formal school, which is a very big transition for a child and their family. And how might those experiences and opportunities that they've had bring about an ease into the transition of formal schooling or how might it make for stress or difficulties or challenges? So you can see on the left hand side that I've put group really that first five years of life, that zero to five, that infancy to early childhood, particularly that psychologists and a little bit in the health field we might even refer to as the first window of opportunity.

(00:20:11):

So a time when LA's brain was really open to experiences and opportunities that were going on for Lana to really lay important foundations and structures for lifelong health and learning and getting along with others. And we know from the background that we have that in that very early period of

time, she lived intermittently between her biological mom and her grandma. And we suspect that that involved multiple, multiple different connection experiences and particularly care transitions as well. So very important to keep that in mind around thinking about transitions for her. And then we know that in that really important year before school that we might think about as a preschool year for children, around four and a half to five and a half, that is when she's had that very significant biological loss of her mom under what I suspect was quite traumatic and sudden and unplanned circumstances.

(00:21:20):

And so experiencing that in that year when she's getting ready to start formal school is a big thing. And then her grandmother then resumes her full-time care. So a very big change for her at a crucial time in her development. And then of course a year later, roundabout up to a year later, we're looking at her starting formal schooling. And we know as you said, that that is a very big transition when children, particularly girls are getting really ready to branch out from just their family and their community into trusting others and learning about the world around them that's outside of their immediate circle of family and community. We know that that transition has been quite challenging for her. And we know that it was a small rural school and it would really seem based on the information that we have that given all of or many of Lana's early experiences that her readiness to go from child-led learning into adult-led learning and go from being able to be curious and explore the world around her to having lots of structure and routine that that was very tricky for her.

(00:22:37):

And I would sort of see that really as that gap between Lana's developmental readiness and then how the system is really set up to support our kindergarten students. So very big and right from the beginning, this is that that's going to have been really overwhelming for Lana, overwhelming in many ways. And in some ways perhaps it was positive that it was a small rural school because there was less people around and perhaps in some ways not so overwhelming. So within that, moving on from that into year one around about seven years of age that there has been a subsequent loss, not a loss through death, but a loss of care arrangements and close proximity with her grandmother moving into care. And then that involving Lana having to move to a new community, a new family household and a new school. So again, very significant changes in the life of a very young child and not her first changes. So we're seeing already in those first seven to eight years of life that Lana's with change and experiences with transition are many and in a way she's quite experienced with change and transition, but that change and transition has not necessarily representative or TED or positive experiences for her.

(00:24:03):

And being about eight years of age and year two and sort of wrapping that up brings a time for Alana when that final year of infant school sees increasing demands on her cognitive skills, her social skills and her emotional readiness. And we know that that's a year where students are really becoming ready to transition into primary school as well. And it's a second big transition, similar to when children move from community into formal schooling and we know that the demands on children really step up, we know that that's because they shift away from the structure and high levels of support that they receive in that catered to environment into much more of a primary school where there's increased expectations around independence. They're shifting away from learning to read to

using reading skills that they've hopefully acquired to read, to learn. Relationships are becoming increasingly complex.

(00:25:06):

And so the social demands are much harder. And of course the emotional demands on being able to put themselves out there, learn, make mistakes in front of their peers, all those kinds of things are increasing in complexity. And we know that for Lana each year, she's moving through those schools years, even though perhaps the previous years for her have perhaps brought about many challenges and difficulties. And I think Tammy mentioned earlier about she said beautifully about sometimes things holding a mirror up to people. And I think sometimes that's what schools do for children is that they come to school and school is a place that highlights for them where they're going well and perhaps where they may feel that they're not going so well. So then we see Lana moving into year three and then into year four as she's right at the moment, as we know her at around 10 years of age that we are seeing that sort of middle childhood and then heading in towards adolescence.

(00:26:05):

We see, particularly for females at around 10 years of age, it's that start of early adolescence and that beginning of the adolescent brain development. And we would, I'll talk a little bit later in a bit of a later slide shortly, but we would see this period of time as what we call a second window of opportunity. So even though for Lana, perhaps that first window of opportunity to have good enough experiences that really help lay that foundation for strong healthy development to set herself up for health and positive learning outcomes, we know that with that adolescent period comes what we now consider a second window of opportunity, which we'll talk about shortly. But again, we see currently where Lana is at is just as continuing and cumulative complexities of the friendship demands that are being made of her, those school expectations that are being made of her, and of course the curriculum content as well.

(00:27:04):

So really for Lana, she's really sitting in that space where it's been, she hasn't quite had all of what she's needed, but yet she's attending school quite a bit and she's really trying her very best to navigate that space and meet the demands that are being made of her. And we want to be thinking about, well, how is it that we can look to what's gone on for her developmentally and what she's brought with her in her beautiful neat package to how we can ensure that her school readiness really matches with our readiness to support her. So moving on to the next slide please. So that's where I really wanted to focus on thinking about if we think for Lana, all of those things that she's been through and all of her unique experiences and the opportunities that she's had during her 10 years and the additional information we have, we know that there's a number of strengths that are very clear just from without really getting to know her very well.

(00:28:03):

And we can see there are those on the left. We know as I said earlier, that it appears from the information that she has, even though she's missing some school days, she's actually still attending school a lot of the time. And I think that that's something to be celebrated each day. We know that it's quite difficult for her. We know that she's having to work much harder in school than many of her peers because of what she's having to work to overcome. And we know that she's letting us

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know in many different ways that she likes sport, she loves to be outdoors. That's the place where she escapes when things aren't feeling great for her. And it sounds like based on what her teacher is telling us, that she's energetic, which is great to see kids when they're energetic and think about how we can channel that resource into something positive because when they have that energy, it means that we can work with that in really beautiful ways.

(00:28:58):

We know that she's got an incredibly supportive family network and we've seen that with each time there's been a transition and change in care, very necessary for Lana that somebody from her family has stepped up to look after her. And I think that that's really beautiful, a very strong what it seems, maternal network of support for Lana, which I think is really beautiful for her and valuable, but also very, very valuable for the school particularly to think about how we can build a network and support Lana. We know that she's really keen to seek connection, which again, that's something that can absolutely be offered in school. There are so many peers and so many staff in school communities that it's something that we can provide in a way that's going to be safe for her and help her. And then I get the sense that Lana is self-aware.

(00:29:51):

She withdraws when things feel particularly hard, and that's because she wants to give her best self I think at all times. And of course when she's not feeling her best self, she steps away. So that self-awareness is again something that is there already that we don't need to build on and that we can work with. And I see those strengths really as providing us opportunities straight up to support Lana in school. So I think about how we can engage Lana through sport and outdoor activities. It's a strength, it's something she loves. She's going to feel comfortable in that space and it's going to be a place where we can develop connection, trust, and just positive moments in school. For Lana, we know it would seem that she has a strong network of support and family members that have really been very courageous in approaching schools and speaking on behalf of Lana to give voice to the difficulties that she's having.

(00:30:43):

And I think that that's so powerful in schools because it gives us a foundation to build strong family partnership, strong school partnership and build that collaboration so we can all work together as a team to support Lana knowing that we all bring equal and valuable contribution to Alana, to Lana I should say. We know that as I said earlier, that the number of potential connections that we can build for Lana are available and how might we find those opportunities for helping Lana find her people both in adults and peers that are connections that are safe and are positive for Lana. And I think also too, as we build that network of support a Lana ensuring that we seek her insights and input because we know she's, she's an expert in her world, we know she's tackled and navigated many, many life experiences that would see great maturity in some areas of her development. Next slide please.

(00:31:48):

So this, I've got up here the slide, some trauma-informed approaches and practises. And please feel free to read through these or take a photo if you like. And obviously you have access to the slides and some of this is repetitive, but it's a really a summary reminder of how we might come from a

trauma-informed approach. We know from the information that we have that we anticipate, Lana does have a trauma background. She has a trauma background and experiences with traumatic incidents that occurred at periods of time in her development that really have made making healthy progress just that much more challenging and more effortful for her. So how might we ensure that we work with that and consider that to help optimise her outcomes and help her have her best schooling experience and of great education outcomes? It's always important to keep in mind that Lana is communicating with us at all times, and if we're open to that as communication, we can start to answer our questions about what she's communicating to us.

(00:32:55):

I think it's always important to think about how we might start with meeting Lana's essential needs first. So I suspect with her trauma background that safety, a sense of stability for her and connection are key. Much of her early life has had moments of instability and how can school, which we know is an incredibly wonderful resource to provide stability. So how can we ensure that we build stability for Lana day to day in her school day, each session each day, each day of the week, each week of the term? I like to think about how we ensure that we try to think about school readiness as how will we meet Lana where she's at so we can bring her along the journey as opposed to thinking that We'll just quickly grab Lana, Lana and bring her up to where we are. And by that, I always like to acknowledge that we know Lana is chronologically 10 years of age, but I think developmentally in many of the school readiness areas, it's perhaps possible to consider that she's developmentally much younger, both socially her experiences and emotionally.

(00:34:08):

And so how might we support her from a developmental age perspective rather than how many birthdays she's had. So just shifting our expectations and demands to support her. I mentioned before about those building safe connections for Lana, both with adults and peers and that team and engaging Lana through her preferences and strengths to develop success. We want Lana to experience some success, success that she trusts and that will come so much easier when we are working with her preferences and strengths. A favourite one of mine I love, how do we see Lana for her strengths despite the many challenges that she has and how do we find her treasure, that sparkle, that thing or things about Lana that are really unique and that school has an opportunity to help uncover for her or help her showcase they are there. And I think if we trust that, that they're there in all students and be open to looking for that school is a wonderful place.

(00:35:09):

Maybe she's going to be a talented artist, maybe a wonderful singer, maybe a great sports star, we don't know. And I think it's exciting to think about the possibilities and how we can have the privilege to work with that and know be kind to ourselves because it takes time. The progress is not linear. We might have great days and then days where we step backwards, but absolutely celebrate all progress that we make both for Lana as well as with ourselves. So important. And just referencing back to that first slide, remember to consider all the time about how Lana's unique life experiences and opportunities have shaped her school readiness and how might we ensure that we are mindful of the way they've shaped her thinking and how we can consider important school moments such as transitions, relationships, changes and priorities. It might be different for Lana compared to some of her peers that haven't had those experiences that she's had. Next slide.

(00:36:15):

Thank you. So this brings me to my final slide other than a beautiful quote I finish up at the end is this hopefulness. I talked early on in the timeline about a first window of opportunity and then a second window of opportunity. And we know from the science that early experience is literally built into our bodies and brains for better or for worse. So children don't distinguish between positive and negative experience, they're open to all experiences. And I think the beautiful thing is we know that they're open to all of that. So there might be this tendency to focus on the challenges or the difficulties that they're having or think that perhaps because of all of those traumatic experiences or challenges that it's difficult to make a difference, but that openness to experiences is equally open to positive experiences. And I think that's where school is really unique in the positive experiences that they can provide for children regardless of what's gone on before or what may be continuing to go on.

(00:37:21):

So we know that for Lana, we know her biological systems really developed in interconnected ways with her brain to help her adapt to what was going on for her. And we don't want to take that away from her. We know that that was really crucial to her survival and her health and progress and her wellbeing. But how might we help to set that aside and see that even with some of the instability and the loss and the disruption and the difficulties that she has experienced, that we know she's had a network of loving family support and we know that she's moving into an opportunity where she's with us at school to really embrace that second window of opportunity for growth that we now know is really exciting. And that's where I want to wrap up by saying we know the second window of opportunity presents an opportunity to offset some of the potential deficits and traumas experienced earlier in childhood.

(00:38:23):

And we're not talking about complex things. We know the evidence shows that practical approaches such as safe and secure environments, the presence of one caring adult and research consistently shows it takes one adult who's invested in the life of a child who cares about that child. They may not have to be professional, they may be someone working in the school that may not have a teaching background, but it just takes one person to take an interest and to be invested. And we know that that counteracts some of those effects of trauma. And for Lana right now moving into that space of early adolescence, we have that opportunity to support her to lay a better foundation and a foundation that will support optimising her developmental outcomes and particularly those that come from having a successful school experience. Next slide. To finish just with a beautiful quote, Bessel VanDerKolk is well-known to myself and to many of us working in the field as a psychiatrist, has done a lot of work in the trauma space. And I love this quote, and it's really about that hopefulness. And he says here that the greatest hope for traumatised, abused and neglected children is to receive a good education in schools where they're seen and known, where they learn to regulate themselves and where they can develop a sense of agency. So that's what I really want to finish off with is that hopefulness for us to hold. And thank you so much for listening.

Vicki Mansfield (00:39:55):

Thank you, Deb. Thanks Deb. That's so comprehensive and thanks so much. We have some questions that will come to after our chat with Wendy. So welcome Wendy, welcome back. And Wendy, yeah, looking forward to hearing about an occupational therapist perspective for Lana and the topic.

Wendy Noble (00:40:22):

Thank you, Vicki. Yes. Okay, we're going to go straight to the next slide. So our Lana, she has difficulty concentrating in class. She's running out of the classroom, she's hiding in the playground. Unfortunately, I see this sort of thing quite regularly in the schools that I visit. It's called the stress response. You might know it. So I would start with a sensory assessment. I would gather that information from the carer, the teacher, and from exploring some sensory preferences with Lana herself, you can't actually separate the sensory processing from emotional regulation. So when we're seeing reactions to sensations that seem a little bit out of proportion to the incoming stimuli and things that look like over-responsive or under responsive perhaps, or difficulties with learning, we really need to investigate that sensory processing that's beneath the behaviours. So that's where I start. We might see things like pressing too hard with the pencil or rocking on the chair or chewing on things needing to go really fast, difficulties with balance and coordination.

(00:41:36):

So these are all signs of a nervous system that's struggling to regulate and integrate that sensory input. It tells us that the base of this pyramid in the centre of our slide here is not a stable foundation on which higher learning can build. So if Lana's feeling overwhelmed by certain movements, smells, noises, it's going to impact her ability to regulate, to play and to learn. So that's where we begin, and it's really just about educating Lana and the teacher about how these sensory vulnerabilities affect how we show up and participate so that everyone's got more realistic expectations for learning. I talk about the window of tolerance, which is on the right of the slide there and the stress response on the left, and how sensory tools can help widen that window of tolerance to support the demands of school. So I might use books like Karen Young's, *Hey Warrior* and talk about the structure of the brain.

(00:42:40):

And kids cope really well with big words like amygdala. Like in kindergarten, they can cope just fine with big words like amygdala, and they want to know what's happening to me, what does this mean when my body does this to me? So I'll use books like, *Hey Warrior*, I'll get a soft toy and put it on their belly and we'll learn to do some belly breathing together, which is really hard for kids to learn. But you've got to remember that kids are not robots. So you can't just put together a sensory schedule of activities and give you a regulated child by the end of the week. We've got to be realistic that there are lots of variables and interactions that are going to impact that day and throw them off course. So we need to accept that sensory preferences are unique for each person in each setting, and it can be helpful to look at some sensory things, but it's not a quick fit for anybody ever.

(00:43:33):

Okay, let's go to our next slide. So then I would talk to Lana about her typical day at school, maybe two or three days at school. Talk me through using the catastrophe scale on the left there,

emergency, big problem, and so on. And see if we can identify those hotspots for the day and troubleshoot some strategies that might help make the day just a little bit more tolerable, help her feel more calm and alert and in control. Okay, so the next slide, what would that look like? So working with Lana and Melody, her carer, we want to have things that we could put in a calm corner, both of the classroom and of the house. So this is not a naughty corner, this is when I need a break, when I need to get away from the other kids, when I need a break from mom, when I need some time out, what can I do not what I can't do, not don't hit your sister. Give me the tools that I can have. These are the sorts of tools we put in the box and just an example on the lower half of that slide of what a sensory schedule throughout the day might look like. So things like having a good sleep environment, no screen time before bed, no screen time before school, preferably having a good breakfast, maybe some exercise by just simply walking to school to get those dopamine levels at an optimal level for learning. That's what we want to try. Okay, next slide.

(00:44:58):

So some other tools for Lana. We want to support healthy routines and help Lana start to visualise going well. So I would use things like in, I know this is a busy slide, but in the middle there it says my brave book. So I customise a social story for the child. I have pictures of them giving examples of times when they've been brave before I can do brave things and a visual success ladder if you like, on the bottom right there of how am I going to break my goals down into smaller steps. So I want Lana to be able to visualise who she's going to meet up with at the front gate. How can we build other allies of connection for her across the school so that she's feeling like those transitions into school and beyond the start of the day are going to be more successful for her.

(00:45:47):

And who else might benefit from this sort of thing within the school in terms of opportunities for outdoor learning and movement breaks, I bet Lana's not the only student who's struggling with forming friendships and needs a whole lot more kinesthetic learning in the great outdoors. So that could be a potential friend for Lana. What are we doing to network those kids together that are all having challenges with initiating play with their peers? So I mean, just simple things shoot hoops or play handball five minutes, especially between the really challenging parts of the day. If you've had a really intense period of maths and you're looking for every opportunity to go to the bathroom and get out of there, well notice that behaviour. Who can we network those kids together so that they don't feel like such failures? We know that emotion coaching is going to result in more academic and social success, so we really want to equip both melody and the teacher with some emotion coaching tools.

(00:46:46):

But let's be honest, learning regulation is not a sprint, it's a marathon. So we need plenty of time and context to just learn regulation. I know adults that don't regulate well, I'm sure you do too. So we really just need time and stop expecting a 10-year-old to regulate their emotions all the time. I don't do so well sometimes, so we need to look at those opportunities for play and making it more fun. So I find as much as free play is magnificent, I really think at school we need to start with structured activities as the basis for that social connection. So by using something structured, we're actually bridging some social gaps. So Lana, let's see, hasn't had much practise, has she? She's moved around a lot. She looks like doesn't have any siblings. We don't think Melody has any other kids. So how

much practise has she had at forming friendships and with the change of schools and so on, it's a big deal.

(00:47:45):

So she may even have some other concerns such as an undiagnosed learning difficulty or a different neuro type that makes it harder for her to initiate and sustain those friendships. So a structured activity, just like a board game or a Lego group or ball games in the playground, a gardening group, these are all things that provide a scaffold that make joining in easier. So there's less pressure for small talk. You follow the rules of the game. It's more predictable than free play, so possibly less confrontational. A lot of the kids I see tell me that the most stressful place for them is out in the playground. It's just a free for all. I dunno how to start that. It's too loose. There's not enough rules, I dunno where I'm supposed to go. So there's even less teachers to help them navigate conflict. And then conflict can be perceived as bullying or escalate to bullying.

(00:48:41):

So when you've got kids that are masking their challenges and they're trying so hard to fit in by the time they get back to that classroom for, oh yay, let's do some maths, you should see how distressed they are. But if you are busy looking after 25 other children, you might not see that those shutdown behaviours, not necessarily the big chair throwing behaviours, but there's a lot of kids just flying under the radar because it was a tough lunch break. So now I'm not in my calm regulated space to do my maths. The analogy, it's move the plant, don't put the plant in more optimal growing conditions. Don't expect the plant to change fundamentally who it is. So I want to see more of those environmental adjustments. Okay, let's go to the next slide.

(00:49:28):

Okay, so melody, if she's been told, which I suspect she has, can you just, Tammy alluded to it before. Can you just go home and work on that behaviour and just do better? I think Tammy said just do better. Yeah. Okay. So do you think she feels validated as a parent? Let's just start with talking through her routine first and looking at the most challenging parts of the day. Even something as simple as playing with the dog together can bring about that joy and connection with her and Lana and hopefully counteract some of that anxiety that they're both experiencing. I'm sure, as Tammy said, you've got to be able to regulate yourself first. Take those deep breaths, fit your own oxygen marks. So I think we also need to consider what was Melody's experience of school like for herself and what is she saying about school to Lana, especially if she's feeling blamed and shamed.

(00:50:24):

So if we can get both the school, the parent, seeing this whole thing as a stress response, not disobedience. We've got half a shot at collaborating between these parties and children here, how their parents talk about the school and their learning. So a negative mindset is going to set Lana back. We need to also just respectfully acknowledge how many things are beyond that teacher's control. They're probably doing their best in a difficult overloaded system. Okay, next slide. We're going, well, okay, the school, is this a place where this child can thrive? How are we contributing to this child's calm? Are we building connection over correction? And what's even the welcoming strategy when the kids arrive in the morning, we need to build that relational safety so that they feel

seen. As Deb said in that last quote, it's about kids feeling seen and that will help them engage in their learning.

(00:51:27):

I would start the day with just a simple, really short relaxation, like smiling mind and then have a visual up on the wall of what we're going to do today. Just simple pictures of what they can expect next to make that environment more predictable. I work with the parents on what do they think could make it easier. What can you be practising at home to prepare so that it's not all new every day? And does the child even have an escape route? She does get overwhelmed. How can we better utilise a quiet space, an outdoor learning area, some movement activity timers to help kids navigate their day? We keep asking kids every day, are you nervous? Are you scared? Are you worried? Do you want to talk about it? Do you want to talk about it? But how much time are we prioritising having fun and directing them and guiding them towards those fun and playful, joyful collective experiences like singing and music and art.

(00:52:23):

I'm going to put it out there. Could we get a dog? I'm just saying, I mean they improve attendance, motivation, confidence, even reading and writing levels go up. I think it's a no brainer. I'd be getting the dog. Okay, our staff trained in affirming approaches as Tammy mentioned earlier, or do we just expect every child to sit nicely on the floor, hands in laps, displaying your flexible thinking? Because I've got to explain a really, really long explanation of what an adverb is, and you are five, six years old, but we really need to learn about adverbs today. So staying in at lunch and recess and missing movement breaks are lousy punishments for kids not achieving set tasks. I always have that image of giraffes and monkeys being told to climb trees at exactly the same level. We need to have a more optimistic attitude and meet kids where they're at with their strengths and interests, as Deb was saying, have truly differentiated learning, auditory, kinesthetic, written options to reduce some of that overwhelm the content.

(00:53:25):

And this is not easy for big class sizes. Okay, next slide. We're nearly there. Okay, this next slide is just some examples. I'm only going to say a sentence about it when it comes up just regarding some regulation tools, some things you might find helpful such as deep breathing and heavy work options like yoga and gardening are really good for producing a calmer classroom. And the next slide is just about what not to do. Some styling tips. So less clutter, less punitive shaming consequences. Please. I don't want to see any more of these green, yellow, red, happy, sad faces if you're not sure what to do. Read a bit more about the low arousal approach and collaborative proactive solutions. The last slide I'll leave you with on the next one is just a little example of how you might be able to make some practical small adjustments to create a more conducive learning environment.

(00:54:30):

So it says sense, so stop calm yourself first, fit your own oxygen mask. Make one little change in the environment at a time. So turn off the lights, notice whether it made any difference, try another sensory strategy, and just keep embracing each moment as a learning experience and responding with respect. Because none of the sensory tools are going to be a quick fix of work absolutely every time. I just think we need to accept that when we know better, we do better. And if you want

further practical tips about running classroom a little bit differently or how to network in with your health professionals a little bit more to support a child who's struggling, I would probably start with brain body parenting by Mona De Hook. That's really family friendly reading. It's not too much jargon. It's really easy to make sense of. So more tips on that from Mona de Hook, I would suggest. That's all I've got. Vicky,

Vicki Mansfield (00:55:28):

Thank you so much, Wendy. Thank you. That's fantastic. And I love, I love, there's so many practical ideas in there, but also some really rich ideas about how we help stabilise that bottom base of that pyramid as you started out with, so that we can move up the pyramid and those slides have got such a depth of information, so they will be available afterwards for everybody as well. So we will move on to some questions. We have quite a few questions that have come through, so we won't be able to get to all of them, but we will do our best. And I'm acknowledging there's quite a few questions about working with secondary school and high schoolers, which we won't get to do today, but we might flag that for another webinar at a different time maybe. So in terms of some of the questions that come through for us, there was one that was really appreciate your insights, Temi, thank you for sharing. And this was also one for Deb as well. And do you have any thoughts on the nervous system, similarities of children who've experienced trauma and neurodivergent kids and the need for educators to be trained in the importance of nervous system regulation and focus on connection in order to create felt safety? So I think that's probably actually applicable to Nelly, all of you guys, because all spoke about that in some sense. But yeah, I'm wondering, Deb, do you have any comment about the crossovers in the nervous system around trauma and neurodivergence?

(00:57:31):

You're on mute, Deb,

Deborah Costa (00:57:37):

That's a great question and thank you to those people in the audience who are curious about that. I think I would start by saying, when I think about trauma informed practise, I think about not always knowing whether a person has experienced trauma or not, but it really being about a way of considering what is going on for the child and responding in a way that's responsive rather than reactive. So I think that is, I'd really like to leave for really Tammy and I guess Wendy to talk more about the neurodivergence, but that would be the first thing I would say about that, a trauma informed approach and these practises. And we know that there is not a one size fits all. We know that all of us are individuals on the beautiful children and young people that we work with all individuals, and we know that we try different things.

(00:58:40):

But I think if we hold in mind that having this idea of an approach that thinks about where the child might be coming from, what might be going on, what might the child be communicating? It's a great start, and I always have a favourite saying, it's that when we work with children, they provide us free professional learning because they're here to show us, to teach us how to do things better. Just quickly, I will answer in relation to learning about the nervous system, I think it's really crucial. I think I'm a big supporter in thinking as Wendy mentioned, that actually children and young people should

be learning about their brains and nervous systems. And I have seen great work done with children from as young as kindergarten, as Bey said, and I had a giggle when she said that they can learn words such as amygdala. And that's true. There's great activities out available for us to be teaching this stuff in classrooms, but also for us to be learning ourselves as adults. What goes on for us, because sometimes when we work with children and young people with these challenges, it might affect our nervous system as well. So great question and thank you.

Vicki Mansfield (00:59:48):

Yeah, thank you. And Tammy, I'm thinking back to you saying the importance of being curious. Did you want to add anything around the importance of, because you mentioned both trauma and neuro affirming practise. Yeah. Did you want to add anything about that question around the crossovers or Deb saying we respond rather than react? Yeah, would you like to add anything?

Tammie Sinclair (01:00:17):

Yeah, I guess entering the school environment as someone who is neurodivergent and is predisposed, I suppose, to sensory overwhelm and social overwhelm even, you are always on edge. So I really liked what Deb said, or was it Wendy, one of you said about creating safety. Without that feeling of safety, the nervous system is likely still going to be on edge the whole time, which makes learning very tricky. And the more negative experiences we have, or all my kids have had, the more it sort of chips away. And look, I'm not credentialed to say that they have experienced trauma, but I've definitely seen a lot of the traits that could potentially lead to that. So my priority is just trying to alleviate as many of those distressing experiences as possible in hopes that they will feel safe to reengage or just engage when they can. Yeah.

Vicki Mansfield (01:01:30):

Thank you Tammy. And I think that importance of connection and safety sounds like that's an important base of the pyramid for everybody, but I really want to acknowledge that sense of going into school in that environment may be highly stressful when I really

Tammie Sinclair (01:01:52):

Also liked what Deb said about, oh no, it's gone. Sorry. A DHD in and out you go.

Vicki Mansfield (01:02:03):

Okay. We also had a question around any tips or advice on how to address separation anxiety? These were pre-registration questions. There are quite a few in that film, in that theme. Yeah. Wendy or Deb or anyone would want to respond around any tips, short and sharp tips around separation anxiety.

Tammie Sinclair (01:02:30):

It's hard work

Vicki Mansfield (01:02:34):

As both the parent and for the child, Debbie. Tammy.

Tammie Sinclair (01:02:38):

Look, honestly, I feel more for my kids when they've had that. I say kids, but it's mostly one of 'em. It's an ongoing thing. But again, it really does come back to safety and just trusting that where you're going, you're going to continue to feel safe. I don't have the answer unfortunately. And I would actually love to learn from Deb about this or from Wendy.

Vicki Mansfield (01:03:02):

No pressure, Deb.

Deborah Costa (01:03:05):

Yeah, that's another really great question. And can I just acknowledge that this is such a hard way to start the day for anyone involved? I think for people working in schools, for the little person themselves, for the family member, it's really, really tough. And yes, Tammy's point about it being about safety and trust is really, really key. And I think this is one where each situation is very, very unique. It can be really difficult to unpack what the reasons are for why a child might be so highly distressed around separation. Very, very tricky. And that can take time to unpack. I think what is key is keeping things predictable, ensuring that anyone around the child is as regulators as they can be. And it'd be great for Wendy to come in on the top of that. I think trying to keep judgement out of it and just trying to remain calm and present and put some simple, predictable things in place. And again, it takes time. Progress is not linear. Celebrate the good days and just ensures safety and trust.

Vicki Mansfield (01:04:22):

Lovely. Wendy, did you want to add anything?

Wendy Noble (01:04:25):

Just a couple of little tiny tips that I feel like I've learned more about this from the parents than anything I've read or watched lately. Just case after case of working out what works. And as Deb said, it's very individual. It's very complex. The reasons are not the same across the board. Just because it worked with one child doesn't mean it'll work with the next one. But some things that I would say work more than they don't are things like building the gap, building the bridge between the goodbye and the next, hello through, I guess the cognitive tools that you are talking to the child in the morning while we're getting ready about next time I see you, what are we doing together When we get home today, what's the next point of connection? And they might even need a post-it note in their lunchbox or wearing something of mum's on their wrist.

(01:05:19):

There's a great book called The Invisible String. So there's little, you need to pick an age appropriate strategy obviously, but things that I've seen work well when the child has little reminders throughout the day of Mum and dad can't be here right now, but what have I got to look forward to? What's the next point of connection instead of all that dread of getting through the day without them. So I've

seen more of those practical things work well. And I agree with Deb, it's all about that regulation in the morning of the carer because it's super stressful. It's like when you work with fussy eating and you're dreading the next dinner. It's the same thing with this, I'm dreading tomorrow, morning's drop off because it was hard yesterday. It's probably going to be hard again tomorrow. So what has the carer got to look forward to as well, and how are they regulating their response and what tools are in their toolkit?

(01:06:10):

So I really think you need a team around you. I don't think any parent should go through this by themselves. There needs to be more support. And I think the most frustrating thing for a parent to hear is, oh yeah, he's fine. When he's here. We don't see any of that. So when the child's great at masking and holding it together all day, there's nothing more crushing for the spirit of a parent than to be told, oh, honestly, great. You're telling me it feels like more blame and shame, doesn't it? It feels like, oh great, so it's something I'm doing to him before I send him to school that makes him like this. No, it's the overload of the whole system on this child. It's too much to ask. I can't jump through that hoop for you, but you need a team around

Vicki Mansfield (01:06:53):

That. Yeah, I think that's a great message is needing a team. And Tammy, you wanted to add a final message there?

Tammie Sinclair (01:07:01):

Yeah, I've processed my thoughts on that. And

(01:07:05):

Yeah, I think as well, it has a lot to do with the lead up to getting to school, which it's a mad rush in the mornings and it's quite impossible sometimes as a parent to be calm and regulated, but they kind of feed off of my energy. So if I can do my best to calm and make it go smooth, then it's more likely to go smooth for them. But just another point that I've noticed when my youngest has disengaged from services and doesn't want to reengage, the key to that reengagement is an interest. So having a conversation that's not about therapy, it's not about his behaviour, this, that or the other. It's actually just about something fun to talk about. And as soon as that link is established, then it's easy. It just happens. So yeah, really linking in with the interest as well.

Vicki Mansfield (01:08:05):

Yeah, that's a great ending for us to think about. I think for our q and a is that thinking about preferences and interests and how do we engage with this unique little person in front of us because we can get caught up in all of the pressures of the system. So that's a great runoff.

Tammie Sinclair (01:08:22):

Create the safety and then do the learning

Vicki Mansfield (01:08:24):

Safety. And so just to finish up, just quickly, I'd love to hear from each of you and Deb at the top of my screen. So I'll work down the screens. Yeah, one take home message for this evening for each of you, just for us to finish up. It's been fantastic and is provided with such rich information. But yeah, Deb, do you have one take home message?

Deborah Costa (01:08:48):

I do. I love this one. And it's really how do we as the adults supporting Lana and students like Lana hold that hope for Lana, while she may not be able to hold that hope for herself. And I think that goes for melody too. How do we hold that hope for her as well?

Vicki Mansfield (01:09:06):

Fantastic. Thank you Deb, and thanks so much for such a comprehensive presentation.

Deborah Costa (01:09:10):

A pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Vicki Mansfield (01:09:12):

One take home message for this evening.

Deborah Costa (01:09:16):

Was that

Vicki Mansfield (01:09:16):

Me, Wendy? Sorry, I'm just going down the screen.

Wendy Noble (01:09:22):

Yeah, I would just explore the sensory preferences. You don't have to be an occupational therapist to try some headphones and try a calm down space. So play around with the sensory preferences with the child and the parent to see what works and then get some expert advice as you need it. I just don't think there's a one size fits all for therapy or for the whole school attendance difficulty. You might need a very different approach from someone else who's been through the exact same thing. So keep looking for those affirming providers if that's a factor for your child, and keep trying different approaches with the team around you and don't give up. Don't feel like you have to come up with all the answers by yourself.

Vicki Mansfield (01:10:12):

Thanks Wendy, and thanks so much for your presentation this evening and Tammy to take us home. One parting message.

Tammie Sinclair (01:10:21):

All right, I've got two points, but I'll make it quick. Something that I've done that's actually helped quite a lot is model the tools and the resources that are going to help my kids. So I've always got fidgets around me now I use my headphones in the shops. They can get quite embarrassed to just be told to do that. So I model that for them. And then the big take home is just put yourself in that child's shoes and try and see what it's like for them.

Vicki Mansfield (01:10:50):

Thank you so much Tammy, and thanks for a really lovely presentation this evening, which was so insightful and so rich in sharing. Thank you all for your time this evening, and I'll just, it'd be great if people can complete the feedback survey before you log off. That always helps us think about what we're doing well, but what also can we do more of or change? You'll get a statement of attendance within the next week and this will go up on our websites in the next couple of weeks and you'll see, receive a link when everything's ready for you. So I'll just see if there's another slide there or if we've jumped to the end. No upcoming webinars. Yeah, so as I said earlier, there is another webinar coming up in June, which is what Infants telling us from the neonatal nursery care to supporting Optimal Infant Development, which will be a great panellist and talking about some of those early windows, which Deb was talking about for our case study today. So looking at supporting infants in those early, early times. And we also have a podcast in the first person living with foetal alcohol spectrum disorder on the MHPN podcasts as well.

(01:12:20):

And I'd just like to thank MHPN and acknowledge that there's 350 networks across the country where we are having access to mental health practitioners and discussions, which is so important. And if you're wanting to start a network, there's the link there, which can be a great way for in-person or online networks to dive into some of these conversations because sometimes we get to scratch the surface in our webinars and we'd like to do a deep dive. So yeah, MHPN networks are a great way to do that. And next slide. So yeah, acknowledging this is a webinar produced by Emerging Minds and the National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health funded by Australian Government Department of Health under the National Support for Child and Youth Mental Health Programme. And yeah, thank you to all the presenters this evening for such rich learnings. And thank you all for attending this evening on a Wednesday evening. And yeah, please take a moment to complete the feedback survey, which is the green button down the bottom of your screen. And yeah, that really helps us develop a sense of what we want to build on. So thank you everybody for a fantastic evening and hope to see you in another webinar in the near future. Thanks everybody.