

# Presenting the Key to Learning: Comfort Corners

Eliza Matley

## *Abstract*

A child's environment can stabilize or destabilize their life. This in turn can greatly alter their decisions in life and, consequently, their potential career paths. Children encounter affective stressors on a daily basis from a variety of different sources. These stressors vary in the severity and potency of their impact on a child's unfolding life. These negative factors, whether experienced in the household or outside their home life, can considerably impair their learning and developmental growth. Impacts involving sudden or frequent stress caused by household violence, general neglect, or family financial insecurities can all be carried into the classroom environment regardless of the child's intentions. This makes it physically difficult or impossible for the child to concentrate and learn during the school day. This disablement, which often leads to outbursts and bad behavior in school, can have major negative consequences on affected children. Since they are not reaching their full academic potential, their future career paths and life choices as well as social interactions can be severely impacted. It is nearly impossible to develop a feasible proposal to change individual home lives in order to improve children's learning capacity at school. However, actions can be taken within the school environment to help relieve these affective stressors. A potential approach to this serious dilemma that tremendously impacts future generations is the comfort corner. The availability of a comfort corner could help diminish the need for discipline in a classroom setting. This approach would greatly differ from disciplinary corners of the past, such as the "dunce's corner," by providing an outlet for the child not only to regain a sense of control of their emotions, but also to refocus their attention to the present learning environment. My principle objective is to investigate whether the availability of a comfort corner for elementary students identified with troubled homes or pressing matters holds promise for lowering the rate of misconduct and violent outbursts, thus enhancing learning capabilities among students in the classroom setting.

## **Background and Significance**

The dictionary definition is "a disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury" ("Trauma"). While this short definition explains its main concept, it does not reveal any sense of the physical, mental, or emotional damage traumatic events cause an individual. There are a variety of different traumas an individual can experience that range on a large scale from physical rape to swallowing a fly in their carton of milk. The event typically includes some form of "abuse of power, betrayal of trust, entrapment, helplessness, pain, confusion, and/or loss" (Giller). While trauma affects all participants present, the focus of this research is specifically on children. Potential results of traumatic stressful events on children include "disturbed sleep, difficulty paying attention and

concentrating, anger and irritability, withdrawal, repeated and intrusive thoughts, and extreme distress" (Martin). Clearly such outcomes of trauma are not resolved overnight and can have an impact on the child for extensive amounts of time, potentially becoming a chronic stressor. These impacts are summarized effectively by John Medina, a molecular biologist actively researching the topic as, "severe and chronic trauma (such as living with an alcoholic parent, or watching in terror as your mom gets beat up) causes toxic stress in kids. Toxic stress damages kid's brains. When trauma launches kids into flight, fight or fright mode, they cannot learn. It is "physiologically impossible" (Stevens). A study conducted by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) showed a shocking correlation between children with chronic toxic stress and the development of chronic diseases later on in

life. The diseases induced are quite extensive, including “heart disease, lung cancer, diabetes, some breast cancer, and many autoimmune diseases, as well as depression, violence, being a victim of violence, and suicide” (West). Another study conducted at a California pediatric care unit demonstrates the detrimental consequences the stress from a traumatic event can have on a child as it was found to increase behavioral problems by 32 times (McInerney). Every child, in turn, reacts differently to these affective stressors and “fixates” on one or more of the response modes: flight, fight, and freeze (Hosier). Once these responses are triggered, the child is unable to absorb information or access the rational part of their brain. Their focus narrows to only finding a way to escape that specific trigger in the best way they know how. If a child is triggered in the classroom, not only is all physical learning ability terminated, but acts of violence and outbursts or even extreme withdrawal can occur, halting the child’s intellectual development.

The implementation of comfort corners can be a way of diffusing trauma triggers by helping children learn to recognize the feelings associated with the flight, fight, or freeze modes. A comfort corner is a designated area in a classroom designed to give children a chance to take a break from their current environment in order to self-regulate their feelings. This method of action would hopefully stop the escalation of emotions from reaching a flight, fight, or freeze mode, allowing the student to continue to learn. In the end, this method of approach is “an opportunity, not a mandate” in order to help the child be able to identify when he or she needs to take a break before being forced to take a break (West). This alternative is a trauma informing technique that deviates from discipline and instead embraces the child’s unknown home life. Studies have shown that “one suspension triples the likelihood of a juvenile justice contact within that year” and “one suspension doubles the likelihood of repeating the grade” (Stevens). Even lesser degrees of forced removal from classroom activities, such as the “Dunce’s

corner” and time outs, can potentially be avoided with the implementation of a comfort corner. “A major disadvantage of using time out as a punishment is that it does not teach a child alternative ways of responding to the situation at hand” (Katz). It is therefore beneficial to all parties involved, including the teacher, classmates, and the child affected by trauma, to be given the option of a self “time out.” This will keep the sympathetic nervous system from overreacting to particular trigger stimuli, hopefully decreasing outbursts and overall disruptive behaviors of the child.

Comfort corners are a potential gateway to informing future generations as well as present educational systems about the impact trauma causes on an individual, specifically children. With research finding that one half to two-thirds of children experience some form of trauma during development, the significance of comfort corner implementation is devastatingly obvious (McInerney).

### **Method**

One comfort corner will be placed into one classroom at Wakefield Elementary School, located in Turlock, California, for a period of two months. This implemented comfort corner will include a bean bag chair, a lavender-scented, weighted blanket, a lavender-scented teddy bear, two soft pillows, a stress relief ball, play dough, and a meditation sand rake box. This set-up will be in the corner of the classroom, with a curtain placed so that the child’s feet can still be seen when in the comfort corner. This will allow the child to keep a sense of privacy while enabling the teacher to locate the child easily. There will also be a sign posted next to the corner that can be flipped over stating whether the comfort corner is open or in use. The teacher will then instruct the students on the purpose of the comfort corner and the reasons for incorporating it into their classroom.

The teacher will build a class roster, marking when certain students use the comfort corner. This will indicate not only if the comfort corner is being used, but also if particular students tend

to use it repetitively or not. In addition to this, the children will be asked to write down one emotion or “feeling” word on a sheet of paper before they enter the comfort corner, as well as after the use of the comfort corner, and to place it into a locked box. This will also be used as an indicator to judge the emotional state of the individuals taking advantage of their own personal time break. The instructor will be making observational notes weekly in reference to the amount of disturbances in the classroom, and if, in her opinion, there has been any correlation to the use of the comfort corner to the increase or decrease of outbreaks. This type of observational data will be collected for a total of two months, with the potential of reassessment and continuation in the future.

### **Pilot Project**

A small test run was set up in a fourth grade classroom at Madera’s Elementary School in Madera, California. This was put in place as an initial probe by a teacher willing to test the effects of its implementation. The goal of this demo was to have the comfort corner available for at least a three week window in hopes of observing a positive impact. With a positive result, the comfort corner would then be implemented for a longer time and incorporated in more than one classroom.

After initial set up and informing the teacher of its purpose and guidelines, the comfort corner was explained to the children. They seemed to understand its purpose and were quite enthralled at a new element in their classroom. The teacher was then left in control of its application and students’ access to it with a planned checkup in three weeks’ time.

There was some important feedback from this three week introduction. After the three week interval, the students were asked their opinion on the comfort corner. Their hands shot up all over the classroom, bouncing with excitement to explain the uniform opinion that they loved it. They were then asked if they had abused the comfort corner in any way, with some examples given to demonstrate what we meant by the

question. For instance, we asked if they went to the corner in order not to participate in a class activity. To our surprise, the fourth graders admitted with sincere honesty that they had not used it as intended. They had used it because they wanted to see what it looked like, to get a break from school, or even to draw attention to themselves. With such straight forward feedback, it seemed that the corner was not necessarily enhancing the classroom environment. However, there were a few children who came forward with information as to how it was exactly what they needed. For example, a little girl stated that her parents had been arguing the previous morning and right when she got to school, she went into the comfort corner and took her own break. She said it was what she had needed since her own personal safe place in her window chair at her home had been ruined by her parents’ frequent fighting. With the comfort corner helping even just one child, it was deemed worthwhile to keep it and work to iron out any problems it may cause.

The teacher had noteworthy suggestions and opinions as well. She conveyed that it took a while for the comfort corner to stop being a distraction. For the first week, all the children were concerned with who was walking back there, what the student was doing, why they were back there, and so forth. She said that it definitely took away from the lesson plans for those days, causing her to initially believe that it was not beneficial to incorporate it in classrooms. Once this initial excitement subsided, she said she did see a tremendous behavioral improvement in a few students who were known to have stressor-inducing home lives. Overall, she also felt that comfort corners could be a tremendous aid in enhancing the learning capabilities of those truly affected by external influences as well as an excellent opportunity to teach children not immediately affected about trauma.

### **Hypothesized Obstacles and Initial Results**

Some potential obstacles of incorporating comfort corners into classrooms are the overall effect of its presence on the children. It may be

necessary for teachers to expect a decrease in attentiveness during the first week the comfort corner is introduced until the excitement of a new addition to the classroom has subsided. Another potential obstacle to its use is a decrease in learning outcomes if its use is a distraction to the class. If the whole class's focus is on a student every time they get up to use the comfort corner, that could greatly impair learning which would defeat the intent behind the implementation of the comfort corner. In addition to this, students

who use the corner could be adversely affected by bullying due to their use of it.

While these adverse events may be encountered during the implementation of the comfort corner, it is predicted that, with the support of the teachers and schools, plausible solutions to each dilemma can be found and implemented. The integration of comfort corners is intended to bring about awareness of the devastating decrease in learning capabilities due to the various forms of trauma as well as provide a source of prevention.

### WORKS CITED

- Giller, Esther. "What Is Psychological Trauma?" *Sidran Institute: Traumatic Stress Education and Advocacy*. 2014. Web. 9 Nov. 2015.
- Hosier, David. "Trauma Responses: Fight, Flight, Freeze or Fawn?" *Child Abuse Trauma and Recovery*. 12 Mar. 2014. Web. 3 Nov. 2015.
- Katz, Lilian, and Diane McClellan. *Fostering children's social competence: The teacher's role*. Washington, D.C: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1997. Print.
- Martin, Suzanne. "Keeping Classrooms Safe: The Effects of the "Safe Place" Strategy on Verbal and Physical Aggression." *Concordia University*. Web. 19 Nov. 2015.
- McInerney, Maura, and Amy McKlindon. "Unlocking the Door to Learning: Trauma-Informed Classrooms and Transformational Schools." *Education Law Center*. 2014. Web. 6 Dec. 2015.
- Stevens, Jane Ellen. "Lincoln High School in Walla Walla, WA, Tries New Approach to School Discipline -- Suspensions Drop 85%." *ACEs Too High News*. 23 Apr. 2012. Web. 3 Dec. 2015.
- "Trauma." *Merriam-Webster*. *Merriam-Webster*, 2015. Web. 3 Nov. 2015.
- West, Jean. "Classroom Comfort Corners." *Starr Commonwealth*. 15 Dec. 2014. Web. 16 Nov. 2015.