

Curriculum and the Traumatized Child

Interview with Lark Eshleman, Ph.D., Attachment & Trauma Therapist/Former Educator

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Anna: Hi everyone, welcome this is Anna Paravano and I am a board member and the Education Director for the Attachment & Trauma Network. We are here today with another interview for ATN's Summit on Educating Our Traumatized Children, the online gathering of expert voices on how to provide trauma sensitive school experiences for our children.

The topic for this interview is Curriculum and the Traumatized Child. Through the process of imparting knowledge to our children, we as parents and educators can use a variety of curriculum including literature, textbooks, online sources, videos, assignments and activities.

Unfortunately, sometimes this curriculum can trigger strong emotions and behavior in children with trauma issues. How can we educate our children without triggering or adding to their trauma and still meet core curriculum standards? This is something for educators, administrators and parents to think through.

What needs to be considered when selecting reading assignments and curriculum for traumatized children? How can difficult topics be presented and taught while still minimizing the potential traumatic impact?

Lark Eshleman, and the kids call her Dr. Lark by the way, is with us today to discuss which tools so children can't maintain emotional regulation while being educated. Before we hear from Lark, let me tell you a bit about her.

Lark Eshleman, PhD is an author, educator and consultant. She is an international expert in the field of child trauma and attachment and is the author of *Becoming a Family: Promoting Healthy Attachments with Your Adopted Child*. This is a well-received book on adoption.

She designed and teaches the program, *Healing Emotional Trauma, Treating the Wounded Child* to help children heal from community trauma. Dr. Eshleman developed and teaches the S.T.A.T, Synergistic Trauma and Attachment Model of Therapeutic

Treatment, and created and ran a multimodal integrated mental health clinic specializing in healing developmental trauma and promoting healthy attachment. Currently, she offers workshops and trainings for parents and professionals returning recently from one such trip in India.

She runs a regular column in *Fostering Families Magazine* and writes for other magazines and journals. Lark's love has always been about children, as a mom and elementary school librarian, a school principal, a school psychologist and now as an author, consultant and an educator for children and families when trauma is in their lives.

She is married to physical therapist and work partner, Bob Patterson, and lives in Chestertown since her marriage to Bob in 2004. You can learn more about her at www.larkEshleman.com.

Welcome Lark.

Lark: Thank you, Anna.

Anna: I am so thrilled to have you participating in this summit. Curriculum covers such a broad spectrum of components in grade level. It's far too broad a subject really to cover in one area session. So, what we're hoping to accomplish today is to introduce the topic, give some insight into how curriculum can trigger trauma and get some real-world solutions to choosing trauma sensitive curriculum.

Lark, in your work as a former educator and now as a therapist treating children with trauma, what are the number one things that you feel can help those parents and school personnel when creating trauma sensitive curriculum?

Lark: Let me say that I'm excited to be talking with you today about this topic and if I may take a moment to make a funny comment here. When I am on the stage and someone is introducing me, I want to be sitting there going, "Oh, blah, blah, blah." I can't do that when I am in front of a whole big audience, but sitting here today on my computer and phone I can do that. Thank you for that introduction. It always overwhelms me to think about how old I am and how many things I have done in my career.

It does seem that this is a natural for me because, having been in the education system for so long, so many years as both a principal and a school psychologist, and then delving into the world of psychological, emotional and neurological trauma and what happens to a child when they experience trauma that they can't get rid of, especially as they get sort of stuck with it.

There's kind of a common ground here for how do we work with these children to help them learn, to help them learn from life, from situations, from their surroundings, from the culture, and of course in school. That is where it becomes the focus of what we want children to do, to move forward academically, and it's always my thought that if they can also move forward emotionally, then that's a plus in schools. All of our schools are not built that way, but that was what we would hope.

So the number one thing is what you ask. First let me say that I will be speaking to you today as parents, or as young adults, who yourselves are struggling with this topic. I am hoping that the thoughts and the suggestions that I put forth today can be helpful also to teachers, to people in the school district would deal with choosing curriculum or developing IEP's or running resource rooms or typical school counselors and psychologists. These are the people who can really either make this difficult situation easier, or they become the people that you find as stumbling blocks when you're trying to help your child. They are the people who most often do not have to pick up the pieces when your child comes home after a very difficult day at school. So, I hope that there are educators listening, but I also hope that there are parents who feel empowered, you are the experts of your children, to take this information to your school personnel.

Anna: To me, that's a gift of having someone like yourself Lark who has been on the inside of this, it's coming through us, the parents who feel like we are on the outside most of the times and inviting us to this conversation, inviting our voices to be heard.

Lark: Absolutely, your voices need to be heard.

There is this whole thing about having a team, every child should have a team. Well teams in the very best sense work together. So for a teacher to say, "Tell me about your child, tease me about your child, so I can do the best to help teach your child," that's a smart way to go about all of this and hopefully there will be some nuggets here that parents, you can take to your child's teacher or other personnel at the school.

So Anna, let's lay a little bit of groundwork for why this is so important. Why books, topics, and assignments can be incredibly difficult triggers for children, for students, and even for adults if they haven't had the opportunity to work through traumatic events from their childhood. Why we have to pay attention to this in schools in the selection and introduction of this material to children. I want to start with a short story.

Oh Anna, as I have said it has been so many years ago now, but when I was a new therapist and had a lot more empathy than skill I would have to say when working with children, I met a little girl I will call Veronica.

Veronica was brought to me by a school counselor who was terrified, the school counselor was terrified for this little girl's emotional life. This was kindergartner who had never had said one single word in or out of school since the day the child heard a commotion in the apartment where she lived with her brother and her mother.

Little Veronica heard this commotion and ran into the kitchen only to find that her mother at that moment was being stabbed by her mother's boyfriend and Veronica stood there frozen as her mother slid to the floor. You can imagine the picture in her mind. Her mother is covered with blood. She remembered later, she was able to say that in her memory at least, her mother as she lay dying, her mother was staring directly into Veronica's eyes as her life seeped out of her.

This child said not one word since that day.

Anna: Wow!

Lark: The counselor brought her in and said, "We have to do something. It's been months now and she won't talk." She is living with her grandmother she doesn't know very well, she was separated from her brother. I mean her whole world was totally turned upside down. Now she is in a new school. She had been in a preschool in a different school before and now she's in a new school to boot.

So, we had to think about not just how to help this child survive the trauma that she experienced but also how to function in school. So let's pretend, let's sort of bring Veronica forward to a current classroom and let's say Veronica is in first grade or maybe she just moved into middle school or she is in a high school English class. It doesn't make any difference. If you don't get over it, you don't get over it. If you are not over it, you're still acting out the post trauma, the posttraumatic experience.

So, in this vignette, she's not had help untying the traumatic reactions with the memory. Every time she has a memory of the experience, the emotion that she felt during that experience and immediately after, comes up and overwhelms her again. Now she's in the class, whatever grade it is, whatever year it is, it does make a difference, and the teacher has just introduced a new book to the class and just said that the book is about a child and her mother.

Anna: Wow!

Lark: That topic, just to those words, reopened it all for Veronica. It re-opened, for her, a world of hurt.

Anna: Right.

Lark: The feelings, not just a memory, comes flooding over her and she doesn't hear the teacher anymore. She doesn't even know she's in class. She is now back in that old apartment where she watched in horror as her mother was stabbed by the man who had asked her to call him daddy. Mom had encouraged her to call him daddy and now this has happened and embedded in her mind, in her world, in her life and any reference to it will bring her right back to that moment.

So in that world of hurt and fear, that experience, watching her and joining her in that world was one of the most pivotal points in my learning that we don't fix and we don't teach as adults. What we do is to feel and hear what the child is experiencing and then try to join with them and help them in the many ways that we know how and have learned how to begin the healing process. Then going through the grief of losing her mother and then learning how to be part of the world again in a healthy way.

So I am very grateful to Veronica, who is now a young adult, to help educate me and sensitize me to what so many children live with everyday.

Anna: You said many things, but what stuck out to me just in the last couple of sentences was the idea of joining her where she is versus expecting her to join you and join the class.

Lark: Right.

Anna: Taking her perspective as a reality, as a fact and as a "can't" not a "won't" she really join you.

Lark: Yeah.

Anna: You must go get her and bring her in. Then the other thing that I was thinking as you were telling the story, is this is a young child with limited vocabulary. So even if she was verbal, how much really could she tell you?

Lark: Right. And

Anna: So what an amazing story Lark.

Lark: It was a fascinating story for me. It was a horrifying story for me but I learned so much and I am very grateful to her. I wasn't going to go into this, but just very quickly, I would just lay on the floor with her in my office with her grandmother and the school counselor with whom she seemed to have some comfort having near her in the room with me for several sessions. The first three times she came in the office, we lay on the floor together and I just had stuffed animals in between us.

Once in a while we moved them and sometimes she would reach forward and then move them but it wasn't until the fourth and that she came in that she started acting out a little bit with stuffed animals what had happened to her. I had them near me but I immediately put markers and papers in front of her and she started to draw and she drew the knife over and over again with a lot of red, as you can imagine. Then she started eventually started talking and sharing.

So yes, you are right and I hadn't thought of this before Anna, but I also have published some poetry and one is about the feeling that we need to have about the anger we have of the situation and getting past it and saying okay. It's a fact now so we need to slide into the depth of her feeling. If it would be something that ATN would like, I would be happy to send it to you for your site.

Anna: Yes, we are going to be listing resources from this summit on the website. And that we can talk about towards the end of our interview.

Lark: Sure.

Anna: But I'm looking at, you have a Veronica in your room, you are a parent, you are a grandparent, you are a foster parent. You are someone who knows that this child or even suspects this child has a history that is going to require some trauma sensitive material.

So as an educator, as a parent, where do we start? Where do we begin? What's the most important thing we can do for the Veronicas in our classrooms?

Lark: Right, so once we recognize or even if we have an idea that a child is stuck, as a parent I think it is important to share information with the school.

Anna: Okay. So share information.

Lark: Definitely.

Anna: Yeah.

Lark: Yeah, because the other story that I was thinking about today was about a little boy named Ben who came in as a fourth grader new to our school and we didn't know that his little brother had died earlier in the summer of leukemia. This child was routinely breaking down in school and was not doing well academically even though his records that came from the other school would suggest that he would have been an excellent student and a very nice little boy.

So when he started showing this difficulty, you can always assume well, it's a new school, beginning of the year, but when it didn't get better and the parents came in and we learned about that, then it's what you are asking about. What do we do? What did the school do? How could the parents help? That's what this is all about.

So when you recognize a child is stuck in some emotional state, we have to understand first of all that academic learning is last on this child's list neurologically.

Anna: Yes.

Lark: For what's going to happen, yes.

Anna: Yes.

Lark: So once a child is in an emotional state, is true for all of us, it's like you are listening to a book on tape while you are driving along and you are learning French or Spanish and somebody cuts you off and you are afraid for your life or the children in the backseat of your van or whatever, you don't start reciting Spanish again, that's not important until you get yourself calm and your brain flushes out stress hormones and you can get yourself back into a calm space. So that's what happens to these kids a lot, as they go off the grid, the academic grid.

So we need to understand that, we need to realize that and as parents, I think it's important to be your child's champion. You need to go in and say, "You are reading a story about families or about a child who has lost a parent are about whatever, my child is not going to hear you even when you are doing math because they are still stuck in the emotional upheaval of their own emotional reaction to the topic, to the curriculum that you are addressing."

Anna: So recognizing this is true is vital.

Lark: Right. Right. So what you recognize is you need to work with a parent or you need to, as a school person, come up with an alternative way you can help this child. So one example of what as a parent, you might ask a teacher, you know that a certain topic is going to come up and you say to the teacher, "That topic is going to be very difficult for my child. Is there an alternative book, reading book or novel," If it's a high school class or something, "that would address certain things that are similar but not hit it head-on?"

For example, if this is a child who in Veronica's case, just lost her mom, is there another book that talks about how the family survives when they lose a member of the family but not necessarily the mother? Could the school librarian help us find a comparable

book that my child can read instead or maybe one reading group can read instead? And they can compare or whatever. But that might be helpful.

Sometimes we realize the curriculum can't change and I am aware that there are some states in the US that are so rigid in their curricula that you cannot change from school to school, across the state on any given day, certain assignments must be taught.

If you are up against that, you have to look at some other ways that you're going to be able to help and one example of that might be if you know that this is the topic that's going to be introduced, you introduce it first with your child at home beforehand.

Anna: Got it.

Lark: Talk to your child about the fact that, "You're going to read a story that will make you feel really bad and think about your mom and what happened to you. I just want you to know that when you get home afterwards, I am going to hold you and you can cry and we can talk about your mom. I know you won't be able to do that at school so we will do it here."

Or send in a note to them with a picture of mom that she can look at or he can look at in class. I mean, whatever is helpful to that child to regulate, that's the important thing. I'm sure throughout your whole series Anna, people are going to be talking about that.

Anna: Yep.

Lark: Yeah, so what happens when you have a meltdown is you dis-regulate. You are not able to say, "This is tough but I can get through it. I'm going to deep breathe, I'm going to write about it. I'm going to talk about it. I'm going to be okay." You can't do that when you are dis-regulated.

So if you help a child to expect that they may feel like they are going to fall apart in class and if they do, it's okay. If you can hold it together, we will do that at home tonight.

Anna: So being aware of the curriculum is what I hear.

Lark: Yes.

Anna: Knowing what it is that is coming up. That's one thing a parent can do, I would say number one, very important, find out what's happening once you know this is an issue. Find out what's happening in the classroom. My son just started at a new school and came home. He is more regulated than he has been in the past, but he was extremely agitated this one day when he got into the car and I said, "What just happening?" And

he goes, "You know, if they want to teach me about avalanches, then they should just teach me about an avalanche. Give me the facts. Let me know the facts but do not let me see people dying and having their arms cut off. Their pain and anguish, it just affects me so deeply mama because I feel it. I feel all of it"

So when we came home like you said, there was that period of talking it out, being very aware this had happened. I had no idea they were going to be talking about avalanches and watching a video of that. So I am more in contact with this teacher now.

Lark: Yeah, yeah.

Anna: Obviously, because it never occurred to me. It just didn't occur to me.

Lark: Yeah. It's a tough way to learn that lesson and your son is obviously a very sensitive child, which makes it more difficult for you and undoubtedly for him, but in the end, how beautiful that he is able to care and be sad for people who are having sort of a rough time. It's a tough way that you learn that you need to get the curriculum.

This is probably a good point to mention that this is not just about reading and books and novels and English class.

In fact I had jotted down a couple of notes here and one of them was that I remember a little girl who had been adopted from Asia. When that horrible absolutely horrific tsunami hit so many people in various areas of Asia, she went into almost a catatonic state because she was afraid that her birth mother had just been killed in front of her eyes while watching the news. She then went through weeks of saying, crying and saying, "If I had been there I could have helped her, I could have saved her."

Anna: Wow.

Lark: So when you have children who are feel everything right down to their core the curriculum can be anything in the curriculum can be potentially a traumatic trigger. This is maybe not a funny one, but to me it seems funny. You can find it in Algebra word problems, oh my goodness.

Anna: Yeah.

Lark: If train A leaves the station at 9 AM and train B leaves later...

I worked with a young girl at one time who had been abandoned on a train at 2 ½ years old.

Anna: For Pete sakes!

Lark: Yeah. I met her when she was 14 and she told me that she's still sick to her stomach and sometimes even vomits when she hears the sounds of trains or train whistles. Well, so you are watching a video about World War II and there are trains. That leads to another recommendation that you can make for your child. This empowers your child to develop the practice of regulation, which is really beautiful.

Ask the school, the teacher, the school counselor, the school psychologist to intervene if need be to allow your child to leave the room if something is so upsetting that he or she knows that they are going to dis-regulate.

Anna: Okay.

Lark: Don't let them sit there and be embarrassed in front of everybody if they can help it. You have to gain permission so that the child doesn't get in trouble.

Anna: So, having the awareness that a child could be triggered this way, and knowing that this is someone who's identified as a trauma victim having posttraumatic stress that could be triggered by certain issues, knowing more about that child's story as an educator and then being able to package some of this curriculum or find alternatives to help them get educated to keep regulated in the classroom and then in addition to that, because you can't predict everything. I mean you could predict the train leaving the station and I didn't laugh because I thought it was funny. I laughed because it was like, "That is a surprise!"

Lark: Right.

Anna: So then in addition to that, having the empowering of the child to gain permission to leave the classroom if they are being triggered and then probably going somewhere constructive.

Lark: Right.

Anna: Maybe a resource teacher.

Lark: Yes. What I would recommend is that you ask about a resource room. This is something that might even be written into a child's IEP.

Anna: Okay.

Lark: We can use this for other examples too. For example, if there's going to be a test on material that is on a topic that is trigger inducing to this child, is going to make them upset, they know it's going to make them upset. Is it a possibility that the child can take

that test or write that assignment in the resource room rather than in a classroom where they might cry and be embarrassed?

I love the way, Anna, that you encapsulate what I am saying and you make a really nice outline of what I'm trying to get across here.

Anna: I am trying to be organized Lark in my own mind.

Lark: There is a lot to this topic and you mentioned that at the beginning that we are really scratching the surface but we are talking about what's underneath.

Anna: Yes.

Lark: What is underneath is, we can work with school and hope that the school will be responsive to adjusting the curricula or the assignment in a way that will be less triggering for our child. But, as you just said a few minutes ago, you can't predict everything and besides that, sometimes children just aren't ready to be able to, or not strong enough yet to be able to regulate themselves.

So you have to do the other two things, you have to make accommodations if you can for what the child can do if they do dis-regulate and you have to help them to learn how to regulate. There is three important things here. 1. Talk to the school, ask them to help you. 2. Help the child to learn how to regulate and that's something you do also with the other professionals in your child's life: the therapist, at church, where ever or place of worship, wherever you are.

Anna: You do need a team.

Lark: Yeah, you do need a team. That's right. All three of these areas could be addressed by this one simple thing. If you can ask the teacher if there is a potentially traumatizing activity coming up, say assignment coming up, I'm going to use the one that I have heard more parents discuss with me than any other specific curriculum item. That is when parents, when teachers ask about the assignment where the kid, the child is supposed to draw or write about their family and family is the trigger, for whatever reason.

They may not even know who their family is and you as a parent may not know who the birth family is. That may open up wells, huge big crevasses like thousands of feet deep, of hurt in this child and they just are frozen and don't know what to do with it. So you might ask the school, "Okay look, this is just going to be impossible for my child for various reasons." Or whatever the situation is, "Could I ask you to allow me to do this.

Number one, could the child do this at home with me?" What that does is allow you the opportunity to coach the child through it in little pieces as the child is able.

So they start to write or they start to tell the story which could be, "I don't remember and I don't know about my family. It makes me feel bad every time somebody talks about their mom or dad or when they were born or when they were one because I don't know about that." Whatever it is that the child is able to say. maybe not even write and you write it for them. When they start to get too upset, stop. Take a deep breath, play a game of basketball, do something that helps them reregulate and then start it again. Do it in small pieces.

What you are teaching is the regulation that they didn't learn when they were younger.

Anna: Okay.

Lark: How to work through something very difficult and still maintain focus, obviously not calm, it's not an easy thing to do but not to totally fall apart or to go into a meltdown.

So if the teacher allows the child, you and the child to work on this at home, that's a great gift. First of all, the child feels safe at home, isn't afraid that they are going to melt down in front of the other kids and allows you the opportunity to help them to regulate, to learn this important skill.

That's the second thing that you can do that really allows you all these opportunities to work with the child. I am not sure that that is the second thing maybe it is the third or fourth but anyways it's another thing that you do.

Anna: Yes. That's just really good information here, I am writing away.

Lark: Oh good, well let me know what you wrote maybe I would get to do a little article about this so we can put it in *Fostering Families Today*. I love that magazine.

Anna: So is there anything else you can share on this?

Lark: Yes. Another thing that you can ask the teacher to do is this - my child is going through therapy and is working on trying to understand the hurts that they've experienced, trauma that they have been through and now you are asking them to do an assignment that just is too much for them right now. Could you make up or would you allow them to do an imaginary project? How about if the project is to write about your family, and they can't do that yet, how about we do an imaginary project? An imaginary family?

It could be a character from a movie or a story or a book, but if the child can use his or her own imagination, that's actually potentially very therapeutic. So they are going to write about one that they wish they had or they would like to be the parent of when they grow up or something like that and it could be a good thing for them.

Anna: Wow! The imagination though, on the part of the teacher, the educator to really go outside of the box and think, "Okay, is a 'can't', it's not a 'won't' and so what can I do to facilitate this?"

Lark: Right.

Anna: Wow, great idea.

Lark: It does require imagination and, I was going to say this later but maybe it's a good point now, but if the teacher is very resistant, you might ask to speak with a school counselor. If the school counselor continues to be resistant or can't quite get it, and I know we will talk a little bit more about this later Anna, about you might ask to talk to a school psychologist.

I have actually had some parents who have put together a little presentation and brought it to the school board and said, "This is my child and this is what this classroom is doing to my child. On this date, this happened, on this date." And all that had to happen to make this not happen is that the teacher had to have a little flexibility. I am not angry with the teacher. I just want you to know that there are other ways and maybe we should get a speaker in or maybe the teacher should have an in-service on this topic and good things have come of that.

Anna: I believe that because I think I mean, the intention is good. It is very good. To educate this child and to have them get through school and be productive members of society and yet you've got this minefield that you are walking through. It's good when someone who knows what's going on can shine a light on the issues, show you where the mines are, so that you are not triggering them and everybody is safer, education can actually happen for that child. I know I have had that put into the IEP, Lark. My child's life educationally, needed to be like this. Go through this little presentation that I had done on what it is, what his trauma is and that sort of thing.

Now, those educators were in our home. Now he is in a school where I can see what's going on so I'm having to relearn myself how to advocate for him, how to educate people I encounter and it's a really different process. It's probably what most parents and caregivers are facing right now.

Lark: Right.

Anna: This kind of goes into the next piece with regards to the issue of curriculum, is selection and application, how can we best support the child in the classroom. You have given us a lot of ideas on that. Is there more information you want to add to that?

Lark: Well I do want to suggest that something be considered if this is a very specific situation that, as we have been saying, you can't always control what's going to happen in the classroom but you can sometimes sensitize the whole class. It's not just the teacher or the school counselor or the school psychologist or the principal.

First of all, sometimes it's the bus driver or the cafeteria worker.

Anna: Oh yeah.

Lark: So I mean you really have to ask the school to share the information in a respectful way that is not just saying, "Oh, here is one more child who needs one more special thing." I have known some parents and actually done this with some parents, to write a bit of a script. "We would like you to share this please with the bus driver and cafeteria people and the custodians." They are all important people in this child's life because they are there, the children spend their days with these people at school.

If the information about the trauma is shared with children in the classroom in a way that explains why, why does Veronica cry when there is a story about a mommy and a daughter and even if it's a happy story, we don't understand why is Veronica crying?

Or, why does Ben not want to be one of the kids who go to the kindergarten and helps the kindergarten kids get to their coats on at the end of the day? We don't understand it. We might get mad at Ben because we didn't know that Ben lost his brother this summer and that it makes him sad.

So I encourage people to consider the possibility of talking with the class, and of course your child has to be ready to agree with that on some level. Some, some kids have said, "Okay mom, you can go but I don't want to be there." Some kids have said, "I want to write the story myself." It can be anywhere in between. A situation in which the class learns why a child has difficulty in a way that helps the other children. I have found children to be tremendously empathetic.

Once they understand, they can often be the best advocates for your child in a classroom. It's a beautiful thing to watch.

Anna: Do you find that it changes the culture of the room, because everybody has trauma. It's just a matter of degree and frequency and exposure. Veronica's story is so severe and yet maybe there is another child in there whose parents were going through a separation which is a totally different kind of trauma and yet it is trauma nonetheless. So if you give permission for one child, have you found that you change the culture of the room?

Lark: I can almost picture them in my mind from my own memory. There were situations where I was astounded by how mature, even very young children, can be. Even junior high kids, who are middle school kids, who have the reputation for being may be rightfully so, for being just, "Oh, come on now, get over and deal with it," to be amazingly empathetic and extraordinarily helpful. Yes, you are correct.

I have seen it and I'm actually picturing someone right now. This girl sitting in the back of the room who never wanted anyone to pay attention to her and after this one little boy was in a ski accident and became paralyzed from the waist down. When he learned to deal with his own situation as much as he could and was able to return to school, of course his whole life was different and his surgeon came into the class with him to explain about this. His mom was with him too but he had become very close to the surgeon.

So they explained that. After the child had explained and the surgeon and explained and he had charts and graphs and pictures and it was great, the teacher asked, "Does anyone else have anything to say?" This is the girl in the back, very tentatively and slowly raised her hand and she talked about her dad who had, actually I think it was Lou Gehrig's disease, I'm pretty sure it was. That's why she could never invite anybody to her home, at least in her experience. So it did open up a world for this little girl and the class to see her in a different way.

So it is a very good point, Anna that you just don't know what good things are going to happen when you, in a sense, normalize them that everybody has problems.

Anna: Yeah.

Lark: And these are pretty bad ones but wow, we can all help each other.

Anna: Well, and that's the thing. We are changing our own culture at least here in the United States, with our veterans coming home.

Lark: Right.

Anna: We are becoming more aware of what trauma is and how it impacts you. Now we are extending that understanding the children and the circle starts from the child and it carries over into every part of their lives. Of course, part of this summit discusses the Aces study, so we have just broken incredible ground in the understanding of this.

Lark: We are transitioning to the last question about what do we do? What do we do if the teacher or whoever doesn't get it.

I just want to sort of encapsulate this last question by saying that I would ask teachers to be aware of their audience. When you are a speaker or a writer, the idea is that you have to know, what it is that your audience is capable of understanding, what do they want to hear or know or learn and then how can you transmit this.

You are a fabulous teacher honestly, you know what I'm talking about here but I am asking teachers now to think about the fact that in every classroom, there are going to be children who are dealing, on a daily basis, with emotional material. Fear is huge for a numbers of our kids. Fear that they won't be fed.

The amount of hunger for children in this country is astounding to me. Fear that mom or dad won't be there when they get home or they might be not in a healthy state when they get home or doing drugs or on alcohol. Children in schools are fearful to a great degree of their day and sometimes school is the safest place for them.

So to help empower teachers who are very overworked in the sense that the pressure on teachers, and educators these days is, "Get this material across so they can pass the test."

Anna: Mhm.

Lark: Well what I try to remind teachers when I do workshops in schools is if you want your kids to do well on those tests, they have to feel safe in their lives. Maybe the correlate is, the safer they feel, and the better they are going to do academically. So don't ignore the fact that fear or overwhelming grief or loss or whatever it is that the child is experiencing, don't minimize the fact that that is going to severely inhibit the child's ability to perform academically in many, many cases.

Some kids are able to compartmentalize and I don't know how they do it but I give them a lot of credit for it. Those kids, there may be some people listening today who will say, "Well, that's not true because it doesn't hold true for my child." There are those instances of children who are able to compartmentalize and just put a lid on their emotional reactivity so strongly that the part of their brain that is focused on academic

achievement can move along. I don't think that it's 100%. I there's always some impact. But for the most part, kids who are struggling with overwhelming emotions are going to have a negative impact on their academic achievement.

So the most beneficial attribute that the teacher can have is to say, "I want my audience, this group of little children that I love or older kids that I think are great, are going to do better if they feel safe."

Now that can mean that a teacher might give advanced warning herself or himself to the class. This is happening now in universities and colleges. They are talking about when material is going to be introduced that is potentially trauma triggering, that there is a warning that goes to the class ahead of time.

Think how much better we would all feel if we all knew. This is not true of me but I mean, if I were a young woman in an English class in college and I had just been raped and now the book that's coming out is about rape, how am I going to protect myself?

Anna: Right.

Lark: So it's a big discussion going on in schools at the college and university level that we haven't even begun in the discussion really at the high school and middle and elementary school level except that there are some teachers who just are extremely good at this balancing act and intuitively understanding how to make the classroom a safe place for the children in their care.

So my hat is off to all of them who do it. My hat is off to all of you parents who advocate for your children. Everybody isn't lucky enough to be able to move if a district is not so good or is not willing to listen or work with you. I guess that's the segue question to your question number three Anna so go for it.

Anna: All right, thank you Lark. I became aware of trauma and attachment issues 13 years ago when I adopted my son from a Ukrainian orphanage. Before that I knew people pretty hurt, I knew that they could have quote unquote trauma. I had no idea the impact of neglect or abuse or the long-range effects of that.

I mean, you have been working in this field for a long, long time. We won't to put any numbers on that because...

Lark: Long, long time, 29.

Anna: 29.

Lark: I do love you Anna, I do love you.

Anna: It is staggering Lark that until very recently, you could talk to anybody about trauma and have all this wonderful information at least for me as a parent and part of the Attachment and Trauma Network and I talked to educators and school psychologists or whatever and they would just look at me and go, "Well, what are you talking about?" And, "This is ADHD," or whatever.

So right now there seems to be such an increase like you said with the colleges actually looking at putting a trauma label on curriculum. So we are becoming more aware of how trauma impacts the brain and the emotional well-being, long past childhood. We still have a long way to go in this and that's why we're having this summit - we want to move this conversation forward. We want to increase awareness and give some tools.

What can a trauma informed parent or educator or professional do when they suspect that a child needs their curriculum to be trauma sensitive and then the key person in the education team, let's see a teacher, a counselor, a principal, a director is not able to see this. What do you do then?

I know it happened with us where a principal of the school would stop son in the hall and in front of everyone just say to him, "Get over it! Get over it!"

Lark: Anna!

Anna: Oh yeah, no joke! So how safe does he feel now?

Lark: Really, really.

Right. Well, so I suggested a few things. One is you share the information with the teacher and if the teacher doesn't understand, you go to the school counselor and then the school psychologist and then the principal and maybe even the school board. So that's one scenario.

Another is that you work with your child's therapist as closely as you can to prepare the child for what might be coming and you try and help the child learn how to regulate as quickly as you can. Now that can't happen any faster than the child is ready to allow it to happen but you don't stop trying. You keep looking for another way to help this child to learn how to regulate so that if you are poor son were ever to meet the person in the hall and ever said something as idiotic as that again, he would be able to look the guy right in the eye, not punching him in the nose, but let this principle know by the look on his face that, "You don't threaten me buddy. I am the one who experienced what I experienced and you don't know anything about it."

That's good regulation and that comes with a lot of help, a good team and a good while that you don't go into fight, flight or freeze as the triggers happen.

By the way, I think what you are doing Anna and Julie Beem and the folks and Jane Samuel and the folks at ATN, Attachment and Trauma Network, is nothing short of fabulous, outstanding, awesome! It's just absolutely great.

I know that you are going to be addressing this on the website, putting articles in books on the site that may be helpful for parents to have in their hands. One other thing that I would suggest is that as parents, when you read an article that really speaks to your child's situation, that you bring that article to the child's teacher or team and say, "Please, I am not going to ask you for tons of things all year. I really need you to read this article please."

So we could talk about my child with a similar understanding and you have to hope that the teacher and the school personnel are professional enough that they will want to know how to do the best job that they can do and trust that when you are share with them, not your own story and not your own pleading but a scientific or even a quasi scientific article about – This is what happens to my child. He gets frozen in his seat, he doesn't have any way of expressing the overwhelming feeling that he is experiencing right now while you are talking about this story of the riots that are happening in Syria right now and he comes from Syria or his family comes from Syria, whatever. He just doesn't know what to do with it and he has only three choices.

He could either shut down completely and he doesn't hear you if he does. He could jump out of the seat and start punching anybody who is around him and he doesn't hear you when he does that either. In fact, the whole class now stops. Or he could run away which could be even in his seat if he runs away, he could be writing crazily or drawing or doodling or playing with something frantically to expend the same energy he would use to run away.

In any of those three cases, those fight, flight or freeze pictures, he is not learning anything. So if they are willing to read this article and talk with you about what that means to your child, it could be a very great step forward but keep moving up the ladder if the teacher doesn't hear you and I'm sure you of done that and been there.

Anna: Yes.

Lark: I have known a few parents or families that have actually moved to a different district or homeschooled, which is not a bad thing if it works for your family, if it works for your family which is a big if for a lot of folks.

Anna: We need to be flexible in our thinking. We need our teachers to be flexible and our administrators. We also, as parents and caregivers, have to be flexible in our thinking about what it means to succeed in school and what it means to be really prepared to learn. It isn't always just about getting your homework done. You had described this earlier in your interview, it is about learning to regulate throughout whatever it is that needs to be done. That's the piece that we can bring regardless and we need to think about that and I invite you as parents, caregivers, professionals, educators to really consider thinking outside the box when it comes to this and reprioritizing what it is that we really are after, what is really the goal.

Because just in my own experience Lark, by creating regulation in my son's life, pulling him out of school and as an educator, that hurt me to have to pull him out of the classroom environment, but it was the best thing we could have done because he felt safe at home. Then as we worked on regulation and assignments and that kind of thing, it's taken a number of years but even he now is on board with understanding what he needs out of the classroom environment. What works for him and what doesn't work for him? What bumps him out of his resilience zone or his regulated place and advocate for himself?

It's been a long road and it still continues but everything that you are suggesting here can really work together for the good of the child, the children, the teacher. I think it would make it a bit easier environment if they knew what they were seeing, that they were looking at this behavior.

Lark: Sure.

Anna: What you were suggesting earlier too early on was instead of saying, "What is wrong with you?" Really considering what has happened to you.

Lark: That's lovely.

Anna: Where are you really coming from in this?

Lark: If you had a child in the class who had a broken leg that wasn't set yet, you would not go over him and poke it. This is the same thing. You have a child who emotionally is traumatized and it hasn't healed yet, than when you talk about these things or introduce these curriculum items or whatever it is, the assignments, you are effectively poking at the child's broken bone that hasn't been set and hasn't healed yet or isn't protected.

They can't put a body cast on their feelings. So you are speaking very eloquently of this Anna and I have to say it's really a pleasure to talk with you about this. But I want to make one last point before we have to end.

Anna: Sure.

Lark: As a school principal, if a parent came to me and said, "My child works really well with a particular therapist and we are getting somewhere and we need to be consistent. But the only time she can see him is at 10 in the morning." I would say, "Go at 10 in the morning," for the very simple reason that this child is not to getting, out of the 10 o'clock reading class, what they are going to get out of the 10 o'clock reading class when they are better.

Anna: Right.

Lark: It has always and that's what I think you are saying and talking about prioritizing, reprioritizing, our children need to get better before school or academics is going to be successful for them. So give them what they need now. Don't keep pushing them to do what they are not ready to do which may be academics or functioning well in a regular classroom or whatever it is. Give them what they need now and very often that is therapy or opportunities to learn regulation before expecting them to perform well in an academic setting.

Anna: Wow! So well said and from such an amazing professional as yourself with such a broad range of experience and depth of experience as well.

Lark, it's been such a pleasure to talk with you and for those of you who would like to learn more about Lark's work as a therapist, or read her book or consult with her on trauma and attachment, she can be reached at www.larkEshelman.com and that's Lark Eshelman L-A-R-K-E-S-H-E-L-M-A-N.com. If you need resources, you can check out our ATN's webpage at attachmenttrauma.com or attachu.org. We do have resources listed.

I want to thank you very much and hope that you enjoy the rest of this Summit. Please remember that this summit is available for purchase on ATN's Learning Center on our main website. Thank you all for listening and thank you Lark Eshelman for being here with us.

Lark: Thank you so much, is being my joy.

Anna: All right thank you.

Lark: Bye-bye!

End