

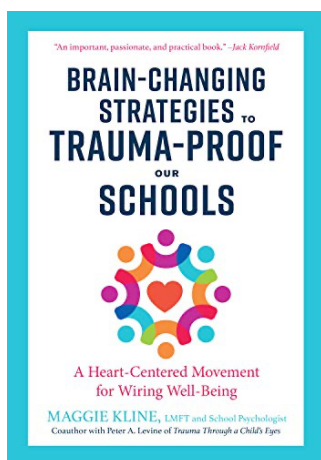
BOOK REVIEW

Brain-Changing Strategies to Trauma-Proof Our Schools

A Brain-Changing Strategies to Trauma-Proof Our Schools

by Maggie Kline

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Brain-Changing Strategies to Trauma-Proof Our Schools is the latest book by Maggie Kline. A California Marriage and Family Therapist, Somatic Experiencing faculty, and school psychologist, she has co-authored two books with Dr. Peter A. Levine, including my personal favorite, *Trauma-Proofing Your Kids*. Her new book is written for teachers, staff, healing professionals, parents, and caring leaders. The inclusion of those in government and leadership positions as her audience is greatly important because the scope of *Brain-Changing Strategies* should not be limited to the fields of education and mental health; rather, it should inform and embrace the entire community.

Brain-Changing Strategies is grounded in neuroscience, trauma research, embodied mindfulness, and relational healing. It is an invitation to provide schools with strategies that will transform the children's neurobiology. The author promises to give us the tools to make this an easy and gratifying task: "By incorporating activities designed to promote emotional intelligence and sensation awareness, schools can improve mental and physical health that hopefully will lead to responsible citizenship." Kline's deep longing is found in her subtitle: *A Heart-Centered Movement for Wiring Well-Being*. She knows that

in order to create a cultural shift, she needs to reach not only parents and teachers, but also the entire school staff, and ultimately community leaders as well as “visionary policymakers.”

Part One of *Brain-Changing Strategies* explains the biological basis of trauma and how to activate its antidote: resilience. It emphasizes the importance of secure emotional connections among students and all school personnel. The author lists what she calls *The Eight Essentials* – the main ingredients for healthy attachment and features detailed activities to promote each of them.

In Part Two, she builds upon the basic self-regulation skills presented in Part One with added tools for specific symptoms and behaviors manifested by traumatized children, such as mood disorders, aggression, and ADD with and without hyperactivity. More strategies and case examples are generously sprinkled throughout.

Finally, Part Three covers special topics like disaster first aid through a step-by-step protocol to lend support in times of human and natural tragedy. It also touches on wider issues like intergenerational trauma, systemic racism, and inequity, with the clear understanding that until all students feel safe, no one is safe.

We know that we cannot change a child’s history, but this book offers a way to effectively influence their neurobiology. What I find fascinating is the simplicity of the strategy: play. Kline’s invitation is to learn to play, but, as Winnicott wrote, play is very serious, and there is no other option when we recognize its healing and transformational power. As Ann Davis, who worked with teens in juvenile court and community schools, says in the final pages of the book:

“As adults we often forget that play is the work of children. That play in a safe, regulated form where choices are honored and voices are heard creates the fertile ground for cooperation, and ultimately healing.” (Kline, p. 303)

When adults learn to play while being present and connected to their bodies, a connection is established with children that allows the dynamic nervous systems of the pair or group to dance in the “green zone” of social engagement, where groundedness and joy live.

To learn to play, Kline proposes the development of interoceptive awareness as the first step on the ladder toward the next rung – resilience. The author is generous, and guides us step by step through her *Resilience Roadmap* that has two major objectives:

- Teaching kids – and adults – about their brains and how to track their own arousal cycles using interoceptive awareness.
- Rectifying relationship deficits using *The Eight Essentials of Healthy Attachment*.

“Play connects. It’s that simple.” Kline invites us to bring play to all levels of education, from preschool to high school, since she understands that play is the way to support development by building trust and cooperation in relationships between peers and among all educational staff, particularly teachers.

Brain-Changing Strategies is a book that could not have been written by just anyone. Kline masterfully combines attachment theory, polyvagal theory, neurobiology (including the work of Dr. Daniel Siegel and Dr. Bruce Perry), and, of course, Somatic Experiencing, the trauma transformation methodology developed by Dr. Peter Levine. Based on this body of knowledge and her many years of clinical and school experience, the author manages to synthesize in her *Eight Essentials* what is required for healthy development of the ventral branch of the vagus nerve, which allows us to be in connection, to learn, and to thrive.

Kline’s perspective is grounded and practical. She gives us a set of activities, games, and exercises to support children in cultivating regulation and resilience – and to fill in for the lack of early experiences that, with guidance, promote growth of neuronal connections to support a robust ANS and social engagement system. She also offers three-to five-minute activities that can be done between academic activities (jiggling, hand-clapping play, etc.) to keep students grounded, and simple practices that allow the teacher to be a safe adult, such as *soft eyes* and *high-fives*.

One of Kline’s great skills is to move naturally between the deepest and the most superficial – but no less important – layers of human needs. Her training as a teacher, family therapist, and trauma expert gives her a privileged place to offer this compendium of knowledge and strategies to support resilience in students, starting with reconnecting to their bodies. The author emphasizes that what we need is to become friends with the reptilian brain, stop trying to get children (or adults) to count to 10, and, instead, track sensations until they can feel themselves returning to the social engagement zone of a calm, alert presence.

As you read *Brain-Changing Strategies*, you will discover that Maggie Kline understands how schools work from the inside; hers is the knowledge of an insider. This allows her to speak to teachers with the conviction of someone with the vocation and the know-how to improve their work. She has experienced firsthand the burnout that threatens any teacher who lacks the resources and support to give their students what they need. Still, she does not hesitate to stress the enormous responsibility that comes with being an educator:

“It is the quality of a stable adult’s attuned presence that transforms trauma moment by moment. Relational trauma can only heal via relationship.” It is necessary that “[t]he staff member puts their own agenda aside; and instead of going into lecture mode (a mental process), senses (a limbic process) where a troubled student is emotionally, developmentally, and physiologically, and meets them in a process of improvisational interaction of both structure and connection.” (Kline, p. 136)

She knows this is not a simple task, and therefore vehemently advocates that understanding its importance should be initiated at the highest levels of communities. Teachers and staff need support from the top so that, feeling safe and supported, they can put aside their agendas and be emotionally available. If the institutional emphasis is on academic performance and compliance, staff will not have the mental or emotional space to play and connect with students and with each other: “It also means that the schoolwide curriculum models respect, compassion, and empathy; and incorporates practice activities as routine to foster healthy relationships.” (Kline, p. 287)

This book is full of heartwarming vignettes that allow us to see brain-changing strategies in action, and to appreciate how the power of connection is (and always will be) the starting point to do the work, which while playful and fun, is not without scientific foundations and profound results.

“Neural connections for pleasure and safety can only be strengthened through experiential learning. When the active processes of sensorimotor activities and sensations are given time to develop and be noticed (interoceptive awareness), a whole new kind of education takes place that optimizes brain function to unravel toxic stress defensive behavioral patterns... The trick is to make sure that the bodily sensations underlying the emotions have time to develop, to be deeply felt, and to be expressed.” (Kline, p. 68) And, may I add, to be witnessed!

Another feature I love about this book is its neuroscience-based optimism: “Deficiencies in any of the eight essential elements can be remedied at any age.” (Kline, p. 128)

And right away it gives us a plethora of activities and social games designed to stimulate body-brain change through strengthening connections at a preverbal and subcortical developmental level. The book has an entire section that is “a trauma-responsive instruction manual for teaching students to discover that the locus of control for their behavior resides in their own inner space as they begin to connect to themselves and with others.”

While reading the book, one clearly has the vision that this is the result of a lifetime of professional commitment to the wellbeing of children:

“For the past twenty-five years, I have been devoted to devising and providing corrective experiences for children, teens and adults based on the science of neuroplasticity... changes happen when students are given the opportunity to experience positive, empowering interoceptive moments in the presence of a caring adult.”

The challenge of such a vision is that it goes against many of the beliefs that govern our society – not only because we are not trauma-informed, but also because we are a cortico-centric and adult-centric society. We believe that “bad behaviors” are deliberate and motivated, and therefore should never be rewarded with empathy, and that the way to change is through punishment and cognition. Kline has spent a lifetime dedicated to overturning these beliefs by demonstrating how trauma shapes human psychobiology, and how, therefore, the responses of educators and clinicians must originate within a different paradigm, one grounded in the knowledge of the unity of the entire nervous system. This includes the brain and the peripheral nervous system, which is made up of the sensory-motor and the autonomic nervous systems (ANS). Educators and mental health professionals are shown how to recognize the various ANS states within themselves and students in order to adjust in ways that provide safety and connection.

At the risk of sounding ungrateful, there is only one thing missing in this amazing book: an index of the proposed activities, classified according to their objective, for ease in locating them. Nonetheless, this book is essential for these times, and its scope should not be limited to schools. It is needed for communities as a whole to work toward a more just world with less mental illness and addictive behaviors. As Kline reminds us, only a trauma-responsive society that puts the well-being of children at the top of its priorities will be able to heal this world. Our society often forgets the power and pivotal nature of play in this transformation. Neither Winnicott, nor Piaget, nor Bruce Perry, nor Kline (obviously) make this unforgivable mistake. Do not make it yourself, dear reader, by underestimating the many playful and transitional strategies that Kline gives us in this essential work that lights the way to the transformation of our communities.



Teresa García Hubard has a Masters in Clinical Psychology, Universidad Autónoma de México, with a specialty in child and adolescent psychotherapy by the Mexican Psychoanalytic Association and a diploma in psychotherapy for mothers with babies from the University of Paris XII, the French Embassy, and the French-Mexican Association of Psychiatry. She is certified Hakomi trainer. Teresa has been in clinical practice for over 30 years, working initially with children and adolescents, and later with adults. She is co-author of the book *Despertando tu Amor para Recibir a tu bebé: Cómo prevenir la tristeza y la depresión en el embarazo y después del parto*, and author of *No hay niño malo: 12 Mitos sobre la infancia*. She lives and practices in Mexico City.