

Fearless Learning

The Responsible Thinking Classroom (RTC) is designed to implement a Process (RTP) which teaches children and adults how to implement effective problem solving skills in order to achieve what they want without violating the rights of others. These skills can then be applied to a range of circumstances which in addition to classroom behaviour include managing sibling or peer disputes, parent-child disagreements, learning about and using key aspects of our personalities well, planning future academic success... and the list goes on!!

One of the strategies that we use to assist students remember this Process is planning. The plan acts as a guide to students and adults to assist them develop the cognitive process of independent responsible thinking.

A child or adult's ability to develop the skills required for independent responsible thinking can become disrupted. One of the key disruptions we see in the RTC is fear.

Occasionally we have students who despite having previous RTC experiences begin demonstrating heightened fear responses such as crying, lying or anger. When we speak with these students we usually learn one of two root causes for the child's fear. First, fear of a parent's negative reaction or second, fear of punishment. These fear responses, if mild, do not necessarily act as a disruption. However, if a child becomes fixated on the punishment or parents reaction, demonstrates uncontrollable sobbing, or is even demonstrating fearful responses to the idea of RTC when they are simply being reminded of the classroom rules then it is highly likely that the fear is unhealthy and impacting on the child's ability to focus on learning responsible thinking skills.

It is common for a student who is fearful of attending RTC to remember feeling afraid, their response such as crying, and their parent's response such as disappointment or punishment. What we also notice is that fear-disrupted students are usually unable to remember why they were referred or what they learnt about managing future similar incidents. This response is identical from the littlies in prep to year 12 students and reflects the findings of the California Science Centre (N.D) which suggests that stress hormones make it easier to recall memories of emotional experiences.

Scientific studies have shown that heightened stress can "impair the development of the prefrontal cortex, the brain region that is critical for the emergence of executive functions including making, altering and following plans; controlling and focusing attention, inhibiting impulsive behaviours and developing the ability to hold and incorporate new information in decision making (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010)." Clearly these skills are integral to the development of independent responsible thinkers and should be cultivated from childhood right through to adulthood.

RTC is designed purposefully to be a safe place for students. It is common for students to demonstrate a mild fear response the first time they are referred to the RTC. Aware of this response the RTP Facilitators take special care of first-time students to help them have a positive RTC experience and memory. However equally important to our response is the parent's response as this is the final stage of the process and the last memory the child will formulate in regards to their memory of the people, place and their interpretation of the experience.

This year we are aiming to irradiate fear responses in all students towards learning Responsible Thinking. So how can you help? Adults play a huge role in creating or reducing fear responses in children, a key reason for this is that children often develop fears by watching their parent's own

fearful reactions. You can help your child minimise their fear responses by following these simple ideas suggested by the California Science Centre (N.D.).

Parent's Guide to Childhood Fear	How to Apply this to RTC Related Fear
Talk to your child about their fears. Remember that to them, these fears are very real and serious	If your child is afraid of going to RTC talk to them about why they are fearful, was it a specific experience, a reaction, feelings such as embarrassment or disappointment? What role are you playing in this fear memory?
Help children prepare for future exposure	Talk positively to your child about what the RTC room looks like, the importance of writing a plan, the skills they will develop, the people they will meet.
Don't allow children to avoid their fears completely as this can aid in worsening their fear	Encourage children to view RTC as a place to learn new skills which is exciting rather than asking them to avoid going to the RTC. If students avoid the RTC they will not only will they become more fearful but they will miss out on learning invaluable social skills.
Share with your child positive strategies you use to overcome your own fears rather than imposing your own fears on them.	If you believe RTC is a bad place or if you use RTC as a punishment your child is likely to view it the same way. However if you share how you use skills such as reflecting on how actions impact on others, how to plan future responses and how to talk calmly about problems your child will begin to utilise these strategies themselves.

Finally what type of memory do you want your child to recall in the future when they are faced with problems?

- a) A positive memory which can recall the behaviour which needs change, their goal and the steps they will take to reach their goal.
- b) A negative memory that they felt afraid and their reaction such as crying, hiding or lying in response to perceived potential emotional pain?

In RTC we celebrate every opportunity for students and adults to become familiar with using responsible thinking. Why? Because our goal is for every student to graduate year 12 with the independent responsible thinking skills they need to navigate relationships, work places and life challenges.