# Fragile Learning Model

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A child can be considered *fragile* when there are certain events that are causing or contributing to that child feeling extraordinarily stressed, in turn leading to the child experiencing difficulty effectively managing his/her day (sometimes referred to as "Setting Events"; for the purpose of this model, these events will be labeled "Context Events"). Context Events can have happened further back in time but continue to affect the present and/or can be situations that children "bring with" them. **Positive Context Events** can set the stage for success. **Adverse Context Events** can negatively affect a child's ability to cope with educational programming, social relationships and behavioral management.

Examples of Context Events that can <u>negatively</u> impact children are:

<u>Physiological Variables</u>:  Health Issues, Medication Issues, Hunger, and Fatigue are examples of potential physiological Context Events.  If a child is feeling ill, s/he probably won't be feeling much like tackling difficult schoolwork that day.  If a child has a sleep disorder, the child may have difficulties concentrating or even staying awake during class time or homework time.  If a child has a new medication prescribed, the child's behavior may change as s/he adapts to the effects of the new medication.

<u>Learning History Variables</u>:  Examples of historical variables can be when a child has had little past success in a certain subject matter, a history of aversive interactions with certain people, or a history of discomfort with certain environments.  For example, a child who has consistently failed Math may "shut down" when presented with a new math project.  Another example could be a child who has been teased by a particular peer in the past, and then tries to cope with tension that might arise when the child is sat next to that same peer in another class.

<u>Emotional Variables</u>:  These can be a variety of persistent feelings, such as loneliness, anger or sadness.  A child may experience daily loneliness due to a deficit in social skills (which itself can be a Context Event) and an inability to make friends.  These feelings of loneliness can result in sadness that can then cause the child to withdraw from other interactions throughout the day. In another case, a child who does not readily manage anger appropriately in the present can have feelings build up over time, which may then overwhelm the child to the point that the child's ability to learn or to comply with directives is impeded.

<u>Extraordinary Transition Variables</u>:  These can be short-term or long-term in duration.  Examples are if a child feels overwhelmed from moving to a new town, from a new baby in the family, coming back to school after a long break, if parents are in the middle of a divorce, if the child is trying to manage a new educational placement, etc.  A transition variable can be entirely unexpected.  For example, if a child's beloved pet is run over and killed the morning before school, the child is not likely to be able to focus on work or to be motivated in ways that the child usually is on other days when such tragic events have not occurred.

Typically, children feel helpless over Context Events because they have little-to-no control over them (and, frequently the adults involved don't either). An adult who has tried to get through a work day while suffering a migraine or after having received a less-than-favorable job evaluation that day has probably felt a sense of fragility similar to what a fragile child feels. And, children with special needs can experience even greater difficulty and longer lasting effects from Context Events. So, while adverse Context Events are in play, it is best to consider the child "fragile" for that time and to employ strategies to assist the child in dealing with otherwise typical daily activities and tasks. The **Fragile Learning Model** can help assist with Context Events side effects.

The following strategies need to be crafted specifically for the individual child in accord with the child's personal learning experience. Below is a listing of the three <u>general</u> domains of the Fragile Learning Model. More specific strategies for the individual child can then be generated based on these domains.

1) **Structure** -- Structure is **increased** for the fragile child. Daily activities can be clearly and concisely outlined for the child, and there should be no "surprises" (no new transitional events) if at all possible during this time. If there are new transitions that cannot be avoided (e.g., there is an unexpected rainstorm that day that cancels recess or an outing the child was expecting), we still try to employ as many fragile learning strategies as we can while trying to ease the child through the transition. In conjunction, the child's day should be as <u>predictable as possible</u>. Predictability not only goes hand-in-hand with structure, but can also help the child feel more in control over his/her environment, thus helping the child to feel more "safe" and able to cope.

The child should readily know:
   a) What is expected of the child before each task/activity?
   b) What the child may earn for completion of tasks/activities;
   c) How the child may ask for help during a task?
   d) How the child knows certainly when the task is completed (i.e., there is an End-of-Activity Signal in place)?

Additionally, visual and auditory cues can be utilized as needed, even reintroduced if they had been withdrawn at an earlier time, along with warnings to the child about when work will start and end, and when reinforcers will be delivered.


2) **Demands** -- Demands are **decreased** whenever possible. During "fragile" days we aren't going to introduce Calculus to the child! In other words, the child should be allowed to work on tasks that the child has already demonstrated some measure of success in and that don't require a large learning curve. Other ways that demands may be lessened are to shorten assignments, to work on more maintenance (practice) tasks throughout the day, and not to "stack" demands (in other words, don't reward work with more and more work, and instead offer easier tasks after more difficult ones, and frequently offer breaks). Choice-making should be built in throughout the day as much as possible. Examples of choices that can be

offered are: a choice of <u>which</u> tasks to do; choices of which of 2 tasks to do <u>first</u>; and, choices of <u>which materials</u> may be used for a task.

We also want to pay special attention to sensory demands that may affect the child. If a child is known to be sensitive to "noise" in the environment, we want to try to insure a quieter environment as much as is possible. If the child is overall easily overwhelmed by sensory stimuli, we don't want to have a lot of "visual noise" around the child, crowded traffic patterns in the classroom, excessive lighting, or anything else that may bombard the child with sensory input (again, think about having a migraine and dealing with sensory overload). If the child benefits from sensory breaks, we may try to work additional breaks into the child's day. Don't verbally bombard the child: instructions should be brief (with visuals as needed), done in a soft, matter-of-fact tone of voice, and the child should be allowed extra time to process incoming information. Prompting when needed should be provided so the child can be as "error-free" as possible, but not so intrusive as to be overwhelming (for example, if a gestural prompt, such as pointing works, do not employ a hand-over-hand prompt). Children who are easily over-stimulated by sensory input need "space" -- visually, verbally, auditorially, and physically, but not in a way that immediate adult supervision is not accessible.

3) **Reinforcement** – Levels of reinforcement for work and appropriate behaving should be **increased**. A rule of thumb when delivering reinforcement is that it should equal or surpass the amount of effort the child needs to exert to get through a task or activity. The "work" a child has to do on a fragile day is going to be more difficult than on a typical day because, not only is the child dealing with daily activities, but also has to manage the effects of Context Events. Therefore, levels of reinforcement must be increased on a fragile day because the child overall is "working harder".

If praise is reinforcing for the child, increase the frequency that you deliver it. If a child earns points or tokens throughout the day for good work or behavior, increase the number of opportunities for which the child will be able to earn more -- catch the child being good more often! And, if points are usually removed for less-than-perfect behavior, give the child more leeway on fragile days before taking away points; in fact, taking away *opportunities* to earn points instead of taking away points *already earned* can decrease a child's stress -- overall, for children in general, a rule of thumb is to try <u>not</u> to take away reinforcers/rewards already earned, but instead the "opportunity" for the next reinforcer/reward, as needed -- otherwise it would be like deducting your pay from work already done *last* week for a job mistake you made *this* week. For the child, it would be like taking away good work already done. Introduce bigger and better reinforcers for the child, if you can. In addition to reinforcers that are delivered for good work (positive reinforcement), find ways to remove aversive or uncomfortable situations for the child (e.g., the child may earn a "get out of homework" free card for the week; let the child get up from his/her desk to stretch or engage in other types of gross motor activity more often, etc.)

**IMPORTANT NOTE:**  One important consideration when implementing a **Fragile Learning Model** is to do so without the child "catching on" that it is being done based on the child's behavior -- in other words, we don't want the child to know that we are decreasing demands, increasing structure, and increasing reinforcement based on the child's behavior. We don't want a child with a legitimate stomachache one day who has his/her workload decreased because of the stomachache, to then fake a stomachache every day after to keep getting out of work.  We must be creative when employing the Fragile Learning Model.  And, as adverse Context Events dissipate, as parents and other team members work on solutions to address Context Events, and as the child appears to be coping better, we will then be able to gradually reintroduce the child to a more typical day and workload.

# FRAGILE LEARNING MODEL QUICK SHEET

*(Do not apply in a way that the child knows you are doing this)*

## ↑ Increase Structure

<u>Examples</u>:

➢ Schedules of daily activities clearly posted that are easily comprehended by child

➢ Don't deviate from the schedule that day

➢ If an unexpected transition does occur beyond your control, ease the child through it and provide      significant levels of reinforcement for the child coping with this transition

➢ Ensure the child knows before each task:

 ▪ What is expected of the child ~

 ▪ What the child earns as a reinforcer ~

 ▪ How the child may ask for help ~

 ▪ What clearly indicates the task is completed ~

➢ Increase use of visual/auditory cues and warnings, but don't sensory bombard the child

## ↓ Decrease Demands

<u>Examples</u>:

➢ Child works on familiar tasks

➢ Do not introduce new tasks that day

➢ Allow child to work on more maintenance/practice tasks

➢ Shorten assignments

➢ Do not stack tasks (do not reward work with work with work)

➢ Follow difficult tasks with easier tasks/activities

➢ Offer more breaks

➢ Offer more choice-making opportunities

➢

➤ Reduce sensory overload

➤ Allow child to earn removal of work / more out-of-seat activities

➤ Provide error-free learning when possible, prompting only as needed and only as much as needed

## ↑ Increase Reinforcement

<u>Examples:</u>

➤ Deliver increased reinforcement throughout the day (e.g., praise, points, tokens)

➤ Find more opportunities to "catch the child being good"

➤ Give child more leeway before removing points/tokens -- if possible, remove *opportunities* for        earning instead of taking away something already earned

➤ Provide bigger, more powerful rewards & reinforcers

For Further Information Regarding Setting Events And Positive Behavioral Support: Koegel, L.K., Koegel, R.L., & Dunlap, G. (Eds.). (1996). *Positive behavioral support: Including people with difficult behavior in the community.* Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

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