Considerations for Working with Children who Have Experienced Trauma

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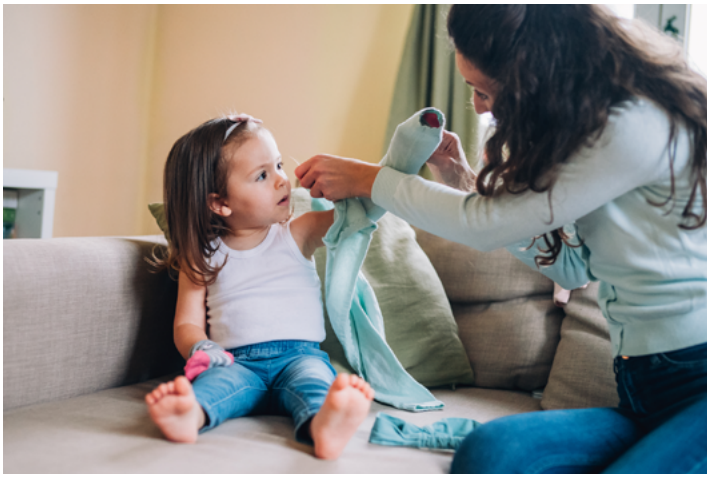
Working with a young child who has experienced trauma can bring up many feelings for the family and practitioner supporting them. It may feel overwhelming or confusing. How to help them may be unclear, especially if the child exhibits unsafe behaviors. In these instances, using trauma-responsive practices can promote safety, growth, and healing. Trauma-responsive practices focus on supporting the child's emotional and physical safety and building coping skills that can be used during times of stress. Trauma-responsive practices happen through adult and child relationships, child and child relationships, and adult relationships.

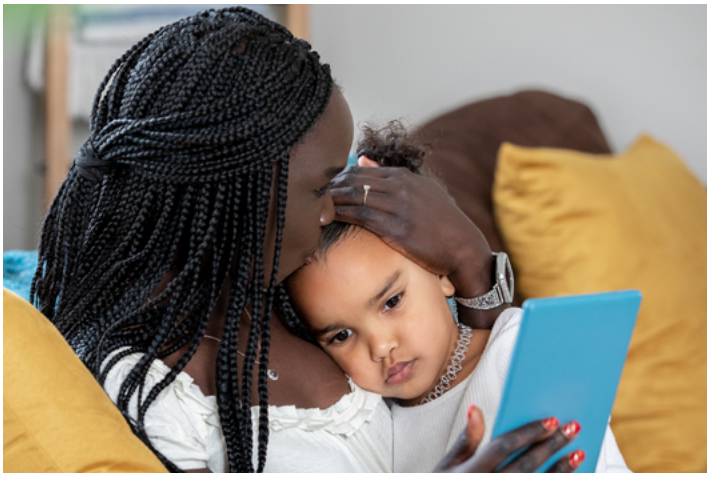
As a reminder, trauma occurs when frightening or harmful events overwhelm a child's ability to cope or deal with the event or events. Some children experience trauma from ongoing or recurring experiences such as chronic abuse or witnessing domestic violence. Trauma can also occur due to a single event, such as a natural disaster or a car accident. Trauma is a highly individualized experience. How an event or set of events impacts a child depends on a variety of factors, including:

- the severity of an event;
- the amount of exposure to an event;
- the child's age and development;
- other past experiences;
- the child's temperament and
- most importantly, protective factors that may buffer the impacts of trauma including nurturing and responsive caregivers, families who have social support, and access to supports such as high-quality early care and education, health care, mental health care, and other resources.

Supporting safety is the priority for young children and their families who have experienced trauma or may be experiencing trauma. Skill-building or healing may be challenging until the child and family feel safe. You may not be able to control how safe other environments are for the child; however, you can actively create safety in your program or learning environments.



You can help young children who have experienced trauma feel safe in many ways, including creating learning environments that provide predictability, consistency, routines, and clear expectations for behavior and offering opportunities for curiosity, exploration, and the development of social skills. Building nurturing, supportive, and responsive relationships can support children's emotional safety. Supporting emotional safety allows a child to feel successful in relationships, to feel valued, to show weakness or vulnerability without fear of being punished or judged, and ultimately to support healing and growth.



Another way to support children who have experienced trauma is to be aware of trauma activation and trauma activators (often referred to as trauma triggers). Activation happens when a reminder of a traumatic event occurs. Recognizing a child's possible activators is vital for understanding what might be happening for a child when they are having a challenging moment. Understanding a child's activators can help you prevent those challenges. You might be unable to avoid challenging moments, but how you respond matters.

- Potential trauma activators in the environment may include loud sounds, unexpected sounds, sirens or horns, doors slamming, lights turning off unexpectedly, unstructured movement, unexpected transitions, smells, tastes, and images.
- Potential trauma activators in relationships may include: ignoring, touch, raised voice, harsh tone of voice, and arguing.

Listed below are strategies for preventing behaviors that might be challenging, as well as strategies to use in those moments when challenges occur.

Prevention Strategies and How They Help Children Who Have Experienced Trauma

What prevention strategies might be helpful?	How does this support young children who have experienced trauma?
Stay regulated yourself (reflect: How am I feeling, what am I thinking, what does my behavior or actions look like? Do I need to use a strategy to regulate myself such as deep breathing, moving my body, taking a minute?) and learn about what things are calming or regulating for the child and what preferred activities they have.	Trauma impacts a child's ability to regulate their feelings, behaviors, and thoughts. Proactively learning about what a child likes to do provides information for planning how to embed preferences into activities that support the development of regulation skills.
Post visual behavior expectations and review them frequently as a whole group and individually with a child. Teach expectations when a child is regulated.	Behavior expectations provide a child with clear information about what is expected of children and adults. Teaching developmentally appropriate behavior expectations supports a child's sense of safety.
Post a daily visual schedule, teach it, and refer to it across the day before transitions.	Having a visual daily schedule promotes predictability and consistency, supporting environmental and emotional safety. Trauma is often unpredictable. Increasing predictability helps children to feel safe and less worried about the unexpected.

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Teach emotional literacy. Help children learn a variety of feeling words. Help children learn strategies for expressing big feelings. Label your feelings.	Young children who have experienced trauma are more likely to identify and often misinterpret feelings of anger or sadness on adult faces. Supporting emotional literacy can help children identify their feelings and then link them with behaviors or thoughts. As children build their emotional literacy skills, challenging behaviors go down.
Offer 1:1 opportunities for teaching and practicing new skills. Give extra support.	Often, young children who have experienced trauma have a nervous system that processes or filters sensory information at a very fast rate. This leads to sensory sensitivity or hypervigilance. When the nervous system is on overdrive, processing and retaining new information or skills is difficult. Teaching 1:1 supports safety and can help to calm or relax the nervous system. A nurturing practitioner-child relationship can help the body and brain relax, allowing them to focus on retaining new information. The same can be true for building friendship skills.
Build and support friendship skills (be intentional about supporting friendships one child at a time).	
Help maintain regulation by offering the child a choice to be near or close to a trusted adult or the whole group (e.g., sitting at a table during circle time).	Recognize that children who have experienced trauma may feel safer with some adults versus others. Children may also benefit from taking breaks from the group when it becomes overwhelming. Offering choices and talking about how the child feels in that moment can help them better understand their feelings and actions. It can also help adults to be more intentional in creating opportunities to help children feel safe and secure.
Arrangement of adults in the learning environment. Think "zone defense."	Creating zones in the learning environment and having a plan for all adults to actively supervise and engage with children in their zones helps adults recognize potential trauma activations across the day. It can also promote earlier intervention or help when a child needs it. When adults are nearby, they can observe a child's strengths and help them practice social and emotional skills.

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Offer preferred activities or easy tasks with more difficult tasks. Build opportunities for preferred activities into the daily routine.	Experiences of trauma can shift how young children see themselves and the world around them. Intentionally creating opportunities for children to be successful and engage in preferred activities can support self-confidence. Children may gain a sense that adults in this environment know me and know what I like. This can help to change internal stories children might have because of their experiences (e.g., Children may shift their thinking from "I am not valued" to "People I care about see me and what I like. This makes me feel valued.").
Build and strengthen regulation skills by offering opportunities for rhythm and movement (think activities that include rhythm and repetition that are relational and fun)!	Promoting interactions and activities that have components of rhythm and repetition can support the capacity to heal from experiences of trauma. Think about calming or soothing a baby. Most of the strategies such as rocking, singing, humming, patting, shhh shhh-ing are done in rhythm and repeated repeatedly and in a relationship with an adult. A body remembers these early ways of regulating. Singing songs, playing games, chanting, and moving bodies can support preschool-age children who may not have had enough soothing or responsive experiences (co-regulating) as babies. Relational, rhythmic, repetitive, developmentally appropriate, and fun activities can also support healing by strengthening regulation skills and helping the brain process information (think: play, songs, games, chants, body movements).
Encourage coloring, using play dough, painting, and drawing to support children in expressing their feelings through art.	Young children often express their emotions through art without the need to use words. Using art can help children express their feelings in a safe, non-threatening way, contributing to learning self-regulation. Art activities also promote mindfulness and reduce stress.

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Encourage dramatic play opportunities to support children in expressing their experiences and emotions.	Often, children will use dramatic play to act out their experiences. Play can be a great way for young children to express themselves and gain some control over scary or overwhelming experiences. Providing a safe space for children to act out their experiences without judgment from adults can contribute to a child feeling more in control and help them make sense of their experience
Build and strengthen regulation skills by offering opportunities for quieter moments or breaks when needed (think: Zen den, cozy corner, reading a book with an adult).	Opportunities for co-regulation (i.e., interactions between an adult and child that help the child regulate their feelings, emotions, behaviors, or thoughts) and relational connection across the day can support young children in strengthening their regulation skills.
Actively teach and reinforce how children express their needs, wants, and emotions.	Many young children who have experienced trauma have learned to get their basic needs met through behavior (e.g., climbing onto the counter to get a box of cereal, screaming until an adult pays attention to them, dissociating when something scary is happening). Supporting and actively teaching communication skills helps young children learn to communicate what they want or need in a way that others can better understand. Children can then learn that a safe and trusted adult will meet their needs or wants.
Watch what you say. Young children listen carefully to what you say. Remain positive and neutral in your tone of voice.	Young children watch adults carefully to understand the world around them. Children learn about themselves by noticing how others talk to them and what they say about them. Children who have experienced trauma may be particularly sensitive to adult's words and tone of voice. This includes how adults talk to other adults in the classroom or program.

What prevention strategies might be helpful?	How does this support young children who have experienced trauma?
Provide LOTS of positive descriptive feedback often! (e.g., "When you clean up the toys, you are being such a helper in the classroom" or "When you tell me what you need with your words, I can help you right away because I understand what you need." or "When you showed Amy how to build with the blocks safely her face had such a big smile on it, and so did yours. What a great friend you are.").	Ignoring the small stuff! Attempt to limit your redirections to focusing only on when the child is unsafe. Children who have experienced trauma benefit from extra descriptive positive feedback. Descriptive positive feedback can support young children who have experienced trauma by building up their self-esteem (helping them to know the many things they are doing well), including how they see themselves as valued and capable members of the learning community. Positive descriptive feedback can also help reinforce the behaviors, communication, and skills we want to see more of!

In the Moment/When Trauma Activated

What can you do during times of activation or acute stress for young children who have experienced trauma?	How does this support young children who have experienced trauma?
Ignore the behavior (for the moment) and focus on using your relationship to support safety or de-escalation.	When a young child is having trauma-reactive behavior or has been activated by a trauma reminder, keeping the focus on safety and de-escalation rather than the behavior you are observing (e.g., when a child has hit an adult instead of saying "hitting isn't safe, we don't hit," Try "I am going to keep you safe. I am a grown-up who can keep you safe." I know you are safe when your hand is on your belly.") Or offer a choice, "Your hands can go on your belly, or you can hold my hand," or try, "I can see how scared you feel right now. Do you want a hug? I am here for you." Or "I'm right here, I'm right here, I'm here with you, I'm here with you. You are not alone; you are not alone."

What can you do during times of activation or acute stress for young children who have experienced trauma?	How does this support young children who have experienced trauma?
Be mindful of touching a child when they are heightened or trauma-activated. Also, consider how close you are to the child. Let the child know before touching a child. If possible, ask their permission or offer a choice that does not involve touching the child.	For many children, when activated, touches they are not expecting can escalate the behavior or situation. Even being too close to a child can intensify the situation. Being aware of individual children's preferences is important. While some want to be close, held, and hugged, others want you close by but not touching them. Whenever possible, ask permission before touching a child when they are in an escalated state (e.g., "Your body isn't safe right now, can I help you by lifting you down?") or offer a choice ("You can walk next to me, or we can hold hands to stay safe."). Even if a young child can't respond, asking a child permission models healthy relationships. It communicates to the child that they have a say in who touches them and how. This can be an important lifelong skill and model of relationships, especially if children have been previously touched in ways that felt scary or harmful. If you do need to touch a child for their safety, let them know before you touch them (e.g., "I am going to put my hand on your shoulder to help you come down safely.").
Approach from the side instead of head-on. Kneel or sit on the floor next to a child whenever possible. Avoid standing over a child when you can.	Coming in from the side can be less threatening or scary for a child when they are activated. Getting down to a child's level by kneeling or sitting on the floor to be at their eye level supports connection. Some children may have a negative association with adults moving quickly towards them or standing over them. It might feel threatening, scary, or unsafe. Young children listen carefully to what you say. Young children observe adults carefully to learn about themselves by noticing how others talk to them and what they say about them. Children who have experienced trauma may be susceptible to adult's words and tone of voice.
Watch what you say and how you say it. Be mindful of the tone and volume of voice you use. Young children listen carefully to what you say. Remain positive in how you talk to and about a child.	
Provide reassurance when and where possible (e.g., "I'm a grown-up who can keep you safe even when you are having big feelings or not feeling safe.").	Some young children who have experienced trauma have not had adults who have been able to keep them safe. Reassuring young children that they have an adult who can keep them safe even when they are having a big emotional or behavioral reaction is healing and can help strengthen your relationship with the child.

What can you do during times of activation or acute stress for young children who have experienced trauma?	How does this support young children who have experienced trauma?
Keep in mind the only goal we have at this moment is to support this child in getting back to a regulated place. This is not a time to teach. Teaching new skills will come later when the child is not dysregulated.	The best thing to support a child who is activated is to provide co-regulation. Offering comfort, connection, and safety through a safe and trusting relationship is what will help a child calm down or become regulated. We can teach strategies and remind them about rules when both the adult and child are in a regulated place. We can hold limits for children; this actually helps to provide safety and consistency. The limits we provide will make the most sense and be the most impactful when there is a clear link to the behavior expectations we have previously taught (e.g., "When you can sit down on the rug, I know your body is safe." "When you can point to the picture of how you feel, I know you are ready to talk about what you need." "I am going to keep you safe; that means I will not let you throw the books.").
Hold empathy for the child and their experience in the moment.	Behaviors that have a trauma component to them can be scary for a young child. Their nervous system is going back to a place and time that was not safe. Holding empathy for how difficult, scary, and exhausting that can be is important. Recognize that the child's behavior is not who they are. Remind the child, family, and staff that the child is not a "bad" child but rather that the child is having a hard time and needs to learn new skills or gain a sense of safety.
Remember, survival instincts are being activated, which is scary and exhausting for young children- especially if they don't have adults to help them understand their feelings and experiences.	Remember that if you, as an adult, are feeling scared, overwhelmed, worried, or angry, the child you are supporting may feel the same way. Recognizing how difficult the experience is in the moment for the child and that the behaviors you are witnessing are connected to a part of their life where they felt unsafe, scared, overwhelmed, or out of control can be helpful for the child and the adult.

What can you do during times of activation or acute stress for young children who have experienced trauma?	How does this support young children who have experienced trauma?
Repair the relationship when needed.	The child's behavior is not intentional or manipulative. If this child had a different way of expressing their experience or needs, they would. Often, young children who have experienced trauma at an early age do not know why they feel the way they do or behave the way they do. At this moment, this behavior may have been one that has previously kept them safe or met a basic need. Recognizing the purpose of their behavior and responding with connection, compassion, and regulation is important.

Find your team

As a practitioner, you should not feel like you are alone in this. There are many things you can do to support healing and growth for children who have experienced trauma through your daily interactions and learning environment. However, having connections to other professionals such as infant and early childhood mental health consultants, community-based agencies that provide therapy for young children and their families, early intervention, occupational therapy, pediatricians, and other mental health supports is important. Having opportunities for reflective practice is critical to maintaining practitioner wellbeing and assisting practitioners to support all children. Reflective practice is especially critical for practitioners working with children who have experienced trauma.

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