

Sensory Supports for Young Children Who Have or Are Experiencing Trauma

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SPEAKERS

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Narrator 00:02

Welcome to Inclusion Matters, a podcast about children's development from the Center for Inclusive Child Care.

Priscilla W. 00:18

Welcome to Inclusion Matters a podcast from the Center for Inclusive Child Care. I'm Priscilla Weigel, the Executive Director and I'm here today with Alyssa Mason, Pediatric OT, and our coaching manager, Beth Menninga. And we are going to talk some more about sensory needs and young children. And this conversation is really going to focus on those situations that we may come across where a child may have experienced something traumatic in their young lives. And we're seeing some behaviors related to their sensory needs. Or we may not know the answers, we may not know what's going on. But they may be currently experiencing some trauma and how can we as early childhood educators, those who are caring for children, really work to meet their needs, and provide comfort, and be responsive without adding to what's already happening that's creating challenges. So Alyssa welcome back.

Alyssa Mason 01:09

Thanks for having me. Again. i This is such an interesting topic that I love talking about. And I think in order to talk about it, we have to kind of understand the the main aspects of this. And so when we think about sensory processing, we know that we're taking in information, our brain is processing that information, and then it's coming out in a behavior, it's resulting in a behavior. And that behavior could be anything from laughs and giggles to running away or screaming or smiling or, you know, anything in response to any sensory input. So that's just kind of the general idea where trauma plays a role is that it's going to change the way that we process certain sensory input. And so it may result in kids or adults, or really, anybody who's experienced trauma may result in them processing sensory information in a way that kind of misinterprets it, or that over responds to it, which is where we see often unexpected, unwanted, maladaptive behaviors. Because what happens is our autonomic nervous system inside of our body goes into our flight fight freeze response, our sensory system at its core is set up for protection. So I always

like to use like, old school examples of if you were pillaging for your food way back when like, we had to go out into the forest and find food, and you heard something in the distance, your sensory systems gonna say, hey, there's something behind you, you might want to run, that's kind of the response. And then you have that response to your sensory input, and you're gonna run away or you're going to do whatever. And so we need to remember that our sensory system is set up for protection. So lots of times kids responses are to that their internal systems telling them, you're in pain, or you're in danger, even though that might not make sense to us as the outsider to that situation.

Priscilla W. 03:04

That's a great reminder, I love the way you frame that. And I love that as kind of the foundation as we start this discussion.

Alyssa Mason 03:12

Yeah, so in a classroom, this can be super challenging, because like you kind of alluded to, sometimes we don't know what's going on. Sometimes we don't know that kids have experienced trauma. And even if we do know that they've experienced some traumas, it doesn't necessarily help us figure out how to support them, even when we do know, as much as we might know. And so we're processing sensory information every second of the day, all of the time. And so when we're seeing these, like over responses, or he's misinterpreting information, we see these big behaviors where these kids are likely, very likely feeling like they're kind of like fighting for their safety here. And so that's why they're not necessarily responsive to our go to strategies of let me give you a hug, you won't feel better and keep going on. And they're like, no, no, no, that's not enough. And so I know commonly, we're always like, oh, let's find the triggers. And then we'll solve the problem. But it's just not that simple. That's not a simple thing to do for a kid who hasn't had trauma, but is having sensory differences. Finding triggers is really big challenge. So I think it's great to look for triggers and see if we can figure out what are those common trends? Where do we see these things, because then we can either help prepare or avoid those things. But lots of times, we're not going to be able to identify it. We're an outsider processing the world and the way that we do and we might just not be able to see these trends, we might not be able to identify that. And just because you can't identify the trigger doesn't mean you failed and doesn't mean that there's nothing you can do. We're still going to try our best to support these kids. So when we think about strategies, we need to think about the fact that we have to be creative and we have to think outside the box sometimes because these kids are processing information in a way that might not make sense to us. So they might not love our great ideas that we have as caregivers on the ways that we want to support them. And we have to be really responsive to them and where they're at in those moments in order to be successful in supporting them.

Priscilla W. 05:22

In our conversations in the past, we've realized that the challenge there is we're working with and we're spending time with these young children who may be cannot articulate those needs, with us and and toward the strategies that they may not even be able to say, Stop. No, that's not helpful. You know, those things that would really be great if they could tell us. Oh, I like that. That was a great strategy. I mean, realistically, and I think in the past conversations that we've had with you, Alyssa, and also in your videos that you've done for us, you know, talking about the permission and the the asking children, as you're starting that intervention or that support. Can you go into that a little bit of just some useful things to be reminded of, and it can work for all children truly, that respectful technique that I know you are so good at.

Alyssa Mason 06:20

Yeah, so so this is really that consent piece. And we know consent is important on a general level. But I think sometimes it gets forgotten a little when we're working with younger kids, because they maybe don't have the word they can't say, Yes, love that strategy. And so we don't always respond. And when kids are struggling us as caregivers, we, we want to help them. We're like I know what to do, I can help you. And we sometimes just try, try try so hard, but we're not responding to what the kids voices or bodies are telling us. So with the consent piece, and especially in our kids with trauma, but really with all kids, like you said, we're going to respond to what they're telling us. So if verbally, they're saying no stop, don't do that, I don't like that get away from me. We're going to listen, and we're going to respond. But we're also going to respond to nonverbals. So that can look like a rigid body, darting eyes, those big big deer in the headlights, eyes, flinching, fleeing, dropping to the floor, kicking, screaming, blocking you, turning away, they can be really little things like pursed lips, or quick gasps, closed eyes, things like that. And so those are things that are telling us like, they don't want what we're offering them, they don't want us doing that thing that we're doing. And so what we need to do in those situations is find kind of a balance of respecting what they're asking us, but not leaving them not abandoning them in that moment. And so, if you're saying, leave me alone, I'm gonna stop maybe being right in your face or saying, hey, will you do this? Hey, can you come over here? Hey, can I give you a hug? All those things that you're telling me, leave me alone. But and so I might take a step back, I may take two steps back. But I'm going to say hey, I'm still here for you, you want me to move back home back. But I'm still here for you. I'm gonna say right here support you if you if you need it, or when you're ready. It's finding that balance of of respecting them, but also still supporting them and not leaving them alone. So if we're thinking about infants, maybe they're just like fighting us, fighting us fighting us. And they clearly just don't want us right there. So maybe I'm putting you down. But I'm not going anywhere. I'm still sitting right here with you. I'm looking at you. I'm here for you. And you didn't want my hands on your body. But that doesn't mean that I am like, fine. You're in the crib. You didn't want me. So there you go. Because what we need to do, especially with trauma is build a trust in a relationship because again, they're feeling unsafe. So if they're not feeling like you listen to their cues, and you do

what they're telling you to do, then how are they going to trust you to support them through this moment. So if we can find a way that that nice balance between those two things for kids, that sort of helping build a long term trust that maybe I can let you help me when I'm feeling unsafe.

Beth Menninga 09:06

I keep thinking about that idea of of safety that I know people bring up with children who have experienced trauma like or and adults, too. It's not just about literally being safe when we look at the environment, but it's if they feel safe enough. And part of that, like you said is knowing you're there, you're going to help them solve this. But I also am thinking about being a detective, right? Because when we talk about children who have experienced trauma I've heard over and over this quote, you don't say "What's wrong with you?" You say "What happened to you?" But we you know, we don't always find that out. We don't always know maybe we'll never know. But sort of what I hear you saying is really really I'm thinking of a magnifying lens now, you know, like really watching and how does this child respond, not for trigger, but I just want to see how they're responding to the world so I can get some clues to how to help how I can help them solve it.

Alyssa Mason 10:11

Yeah, I love that you said that because sometimes kids big body responses give us clues to what kind of strategies actually might help them. Like when I watch kids that I work with, sometimes I'll see them, like, throw themselves against the big crash pillows that I have in the gym that I have. And sometimes I'm like, maybe their body really likes that. Like they're trying to figure out how to make their body feel better. When really, it looks like we're just mad and throwing myself against the wall. But maybe that input feels good. So maybe once we are ready to accept a strategy, I'm going to think about how can I give their body that like big impact work in a way that helps us coregulate together and get back to there. So like, you're saying, like being a detective, the more we watch and learn from kids, and sometimes watching and learning is so hard, because we're like, they're upset, I should be doing something I should be helping but observing is actually so so, so, so helpful when we're talking about sensory processing.

Priscilla W. 11:08

Oh, true, what a great visual too, is take out that magnifying glass and watch. And it's just It's so reassuring I think for a child too when you're saying when they see you reading their cues. You're stepping back, you're saying, I'm here and you're reminding them, I'm here for you, that verbal reminder, but you're not pushing forward. You're stepping back. It's, it's so respectful, I think. And hopefully, ideally, you've built a quality relationship with that child, because they're in your care. And you know them well, but maybe not. But you're sending all those messages that that are telling them, I'm I'm going to be that supportive partner here, I just need to figure out what it looks like. And let's do it together. I think that's that's the key.

Alyssa Mason 11:56

Yeah and I mean, for all of our littles and lots of kids even pass like, I think we talk about coregulation for a lot of times, like kids under five, and then it's like, all of a sudden, they're supposed to get it on their own. But really coregulation happens throughout our life, I believe. And so remembering too that, like, if this kid doesn't want you, that doesn't mean they're just gonna figure it out on their own, or they're just gonna relax on their own or calm down or figure it out. It's completely developmentally appropriate that they need coregulation, they need us maybe to sit down and do the thing with them. And not just to or for them, we are so often want to do something for a kid. But we need to join with them and figure out how do we do this together to make progress towards feeling better, feeling safer, feeling more regulated.

Priscilla W. 12:44

Great reminder. Oh, that's great. So as we think about going through that consent process, and also modeling, the respectful understanding, and that being the detective. So what are some things that once you have really done those things, you start to see, hmm, this might be something that is causing a lot of discomfort. Or what can you do in those moments to really help a child feel safe and secure?

Alyssa Mason 13:18

Yes, so this is where it's going to be more, it's going to honestly be like trial and error, probably a little bit. But you can try lots of things, lots of your go to's, you can try them. But what you what I what I hope to get to always in these situations is a point where kids are accepting of what you're offering. So if you offer them your hug, whatever the things are, that you do, but if we're still feeling unsafe, or something like that, there's a good chance we're not accepting that from you. So we can continue to try those things. But I like to try lots of supportive things that don't necessarily require me to be hands on doing something to work for you. So I have lots of favorites for this. But let's say we've got a kid who's just super upset, doesn't want anything to do with you wants you so far away from them. But maybe you can offer them a cup with a straw so they can drink from a straw if they're interested. I know. We don't always give cups to kids who are super upset because they get thrown, but if you don't think they're gonna throw it, giving them a cup of the straw. So we think about again, I relate a lot of things to infants, because I think we forget that regulating things as infants still regulate as often as adults. And so infants often like sucking, pacifiers, bottles. So giving kids something with a straw gives them the opportunity to suck, which can be really calming. If you add a thick liquid, something that's resistive, like an applesauce or a yogurt or smoothie to that, then they're doing more work. It's actually more calming. So maybe if we give them that they can get to a place where they can better accept strategies from us because their sensory system has started to calm their nervous system is starting to say maybe we're okay, maybe we're safer than we think. And then you can, again offer that strategy. Often times you

hear changes in their breath or their, you see their face, their cheeks are getting a little less red. And maybe that's the time to again, try to offer them your support. Another great thing to do in these opportunities is just to model without any expectation of kids doing it with you. Take the deep breath, because oftentimes, when kids are dysregulated, so are we, we need to regulate our own self. So maybe I just sit there and I take five deep breaths, because number one, it is good for me as well. And it models for the kid. And maybe they jump in, that's wonderful. Maybe you've done this modeling 10 times, and all of a sudden, you hear them take a deep breath, even though they still want nothing really to do with you. And you're like, it's working, something's working, it's kind of happening. So modeling is a great one. I also think in these situations where we're trying to figure out how to like partner with kids, and we're watching them so closely, finding ways to join them in those things that feel good for their body. So I mentioned the the kid who crashes into the crash pad, but another one we see a lot is stomping our feet, like we're on the floor rolling around stomping or kicking our feet. And sometimes in order to try to join a kid, I'll say, I see your feet stomping, do you think I can help you stomp them even harder, and then maybe they let me grab on to their ankles and stomp their feet on the ground. Stomping is, I'm an advocate for stomping because especially at a young age, it's safe for the kid, it's safe for our peers. Whereas like kicking and stuff can get really dangerous stomping is safe. So if it's safe, and it feels good, then let's stomp, let's stomp it out. And maybe let's stomp it out together. Or maybe I just say I, you know, this is also making me feel really frustrated, I'm gonna stomp my feet like you would and see if that makes my body feel any better. And I don't have to be touching your body or doing anything with you, I can just stay here, and I can stomp my feet. And maybe that gets their attention. Or maybe again, they're feeling like, okay, I feel more safe with this person, they didn't force me into anything. They didn't have to put their hands on me. But they're telling me they're here to support me. And we're trying to figure this out together. So it's a little more of that, like, I'm joining you in this. And we're trying to figure out how to get out of this together. So sometimes those things can be really, really helpful in those moments.

Priscilla W. 17:29

I think that is such a good point to remember that the safety of stamping, I mean, that's that little tidbit right there. Because so often, I think, in those moments, when we see a child very, very upset, and they're doing so, you know, it's that whole idea of will punch a pillow or do you know, kick this so, but really this goes pieces that I mean, the things that you were just describing are safe, helpful. And even if you're not actively engaged and helping the child stomp, you can be stomping, which is an intense attention getter. for that child to be looking at you watching you even just breaking the pattern of perhaps a larger tantrum that's happening, you're, you're creating a visual distraction, that could be very helpful in the long run.

Beth Menninga 18:22

Alyssa, I was thinking about the other reactions to feeling unsafe, like the kids who shut down, or kind of clinging in or clingy. Just thoughts about those kids.

Alyssa Mason 18:36

Yea, I love that you asked because I feel like during these conversations, I always hear about the big behaviors. But we know that there's the other side of that. And I, as a therapist, I often worry about those kids getting lost in the shuffle because they're not having big behaviors. And maybe we can work with that in the classroom. So we don't necessarily address it. But a lot of the same things can apply, it just looks different. So if I have a kid who's just like all over me all day long, like maybe their sensory dysregulation is telling them like attach to that person who right now feels safe. Because you're not you know, you're feeling dysregulated sometimes I'll use the same kind of strategies in a way to kind of help kids feel safe away from my body. So you know, whatever that is. So one thing I love to do is I like to have hum as a connection to kids. As they're on me, they can feel the vibrations, they can hear the sound of it. But it can also be one of those things that we do together. But you don't have to be right here with me. So maybe if you're across the group from me, we can do like a humming break where you don't have to necessarily come to me but humming has done something if I can get you to do it, then it can calm you because now you're creating that vibration in your own body. You can also get that kind of away from me connection like that moment of like what let's look at each other and do this home break. Where you're getting something regulating or connecting back, I'm still saying, Hey, I'm here for you, you're still safe. But we're apart, where you know, maybe progressing that maybe that's you sitting right next to me first, and then you're sitting two kids away from the group. And, you know, now you can be across from me. But now we've created this moment of like, it's almost like a safety check in with that person who feels safe. Or, I don't know, finding any ways to kind of make that connection, and then grow that connection. So even with, you know, maybe as a visual, we do a deep breath together. And we have a hand signal. So every time you know, if you look at me from across the room, and you feel like running over to me, maybe first we do, I point to my nose, and then we both take a deep breath together, and we have that moment. And then maybe we can go back to what it is that we were doing, because we did that kind of safety check. So that's one that I like to I like to really do with some of those kids who are maybe doing more of that shutting down, especially when they seem connected to a caregiver. When we get that full shutdown, and we're not super connected with a caregiver, then I like to go more to that, like, how can I get you to maybe accept some of these things? Because likely, we still need that piece that we were talking about with kids with big behaviors where I'm hoping to be able to connect with you and join with you in this. And maybe you're not kicking and screaming to tell me no, but you're just completely shut down. And that's telling me no. So it's those same strategies of like, how do we get in again, it doesn't have to be me doing something to work for you. But it might be that now we can take this deep breath together, we can do this strategy together, because they took the time to say, Hey, I'm here for you. I'm sitting with you, I see that, you

know, maybe you're not engaged in the activity. So maybe I can sit here with you. And we can do this. And maybe you do the modeling right next to them where you're doing a deep breath or you're doing something like that. But at the core of it, it's it's it can still be dispensary dysregulation. It's a difference in their response. But the the core things that we want to do to get to a more regulated state are the same. So if we have that attachment piece, it might look a little different. If we don't have that attachment piece, it's really similar. Whether we're doing big behaviors or not big behaviors is we still need to work on that trust in that relationship in order to accept the coregulation strategies and work on that regulation piece.

Priscilla W. 22:19

Definitely great. Oh, I think Alyssa, we could talk all day. And I think I've we've said that at the end of every single podcast we've had you on. And I hope that we can continue to talk about all these things over, you know, many months ahead because I think the tools that you've just shared are very useful. And I I love that you because of your background to have of being in the classroom, you just put yourself right back there. And I can just see the wheels turning as you're talking about it. And here those those strategies come from really someone who knows and understands children and their occupational therapy needs and their sensory needs, but also the needs of the educator in the moment as well. And so we so appreciate that, having you here and having you on the podcast. And we look forward to having you back again for other topics. And truly, for our listeners out there. If there's something that you feel would be useful to have Alyssa join us and talk about, we love ideas for podcasts. We always like new ideas for podcasts. So certainly go through our info app tab and on our website inclusive childcare.org. We have lots of other resources and tools for you related to sensory needs. And we just welcome you back hopefully very soon. Alyssa, thank you so much. And Beth, thanks for being here, too. It was great. Yes, thank you. All right, take care.

Narrator 23:51

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