Tip Sheets
Trauma and Challenging Behavior

Most Common Symptom of Trauma in Young Children

Preschoolers are often observed to be more irritable, impulsive and aggressive after a trauma experience. Although there are many possible symptoms of trauma, the most common symptoms of trauma in young children include:

- Clinginess
- Separation anxiety
- Anxiety related to what “might happen”
- Difficulty concentrating
- Challenging behaviors

Strategies to Use Following a Child’s Traumatic Experience

- Be an active listener and reflect with the child in order to help the child feel understood and supported
  - Example: “How did your tummy feel when that happened?”
- Try to understand the child’s perspective
- Consistently acknowledge the child’s feelings
  - Example: “I bet that was really scary.”
- It is important not to make a child talk about the experience unless she indicates the need or desire to talk

Behavior is Communication

Children who have been impacted by trauma may be mistaken as being a child with difficult challenges and/or receive a misdiagnosis. Since infants, toddlers and many preschoolers do not typically have the language skills to communicate their needs and experiences, they communicate through their behavior.

Even if a young child does have strong verbal skills, the child may not have the ability to find the words to express his thoughts and feelings related to his experience. The use of behavior as a form of communication is often a child’s only mechanism for letting those around her know that something is amiss. These symptoms can be viewed as a child’s attempt to return to the world she knew before the traumatic experience. Experiencing a traumatic event does not mean that the child will be irreparably damaged or that he will definitely have challenges throughout life because of the event. With time and support most children will return to their level of functioning prior to the experience.
• Should the child indicate the need or desire to talk it is important to use developmentally appropriate language

• Soothe and comfort the child as needed

• Re-establish routines and roles following a child’s experience of trauma

• Provide safety, stability, consistency, nurturance and safe places to play

• Provide the child with opportunities to “just be a child”

• The “best medicine, so to speak, is the experience of being in a meaningful and loving relationship

Tips for Building Caring Relationships

1. **Provide attention and affection**
   Provide children with smiles and hugs to promote development of a sense of safety, security, love, belonging and acceptance

2. **Play**
   Take some time to join the children in their play. Learn about their interests, skills, abilities and areas of need. Promote the development of physical, imagination and social skills.

3. **Provide comfort**
   Let children know they are not alone when they have “big” feelings. Teach children healthy ways to comfort themselves.

4. **Listen with interest**
   Show children that they are valued and what they have to say is important by getting down to their level, making eye contact and really listening.

5. **Show empathy**
   Let children know that you understand how they feel. This helps them to learn to understand others.

6. **Promote emotional literacy**
   Help children learn to identify and express their emotions. Point out that everyone has feelings.

7. **Limit media use**
   The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children under 2 years of age not have any “screen” time. Between the ages of 2 – 4 years children should have less than 1 hour each day of screen time. Instead provide children with opportunities to play and interact with others

8. **Read/tell stories/sing**
   Share stories with young children that are meaningful in their lives and show people having compassion, kindness and understanding for one another.

   Emphasize the positive: celebrate, sing songs, draw pictures, look at photographs.
9. Identify the child’s strengths and use these to encourage growth and development

10. Promote self-care
Teach children about the importance of healthy eating, exercise and rest.

Additional Resources for Supporting the Communication Skills of Infants and Toddlers:

Child Trauma Academy
http://childtrauma.org/

Reaching IN…Reaching Out Children’s Storybooks that Promote Resilience

More Children’s Storybooks that Promote Resilience

Children’s Storybooks that Promote Resilience through Cultural Competence

The National Child Traumatic Stress Network
http://www.nctsn.org/

Zero to Three
https://www.zerotothree.org/

For more information on children and challenging behavior, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

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