

Tip Sheets

Trauma and Challenging Behavior

Most Common Symptoms 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

Behavior is Communication



Children who have been impacted by trauma may be mistaken and/or misdiagnosed as being a child with difficult

challenges. Because infants, toddlers and some preschoolers may not 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 them know that something is amiss. These symptoms can be viewed as a

child’s attempt to return to the world they knew before the traumatic experience.

Experiencing a traumatic event does not mean that the child will be irreparably damaged or 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.

Strategies to Use Following a Child’s Traumatic Experience

- Be an active listener and reflect with the child in order to help them feel understood and supported; “How did your tummy feel when that happened?”
- Try to understand the child’s perspective.
- Consistently acknowledge the child’s feelings, such as “I bet that was really scary.”
- It is important not to make a child talk about the experience unless they indicate the need or desire to talk. 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 opportunities to “just be a child.”
- The best “medicine” is the experience of being in a meaningful and loving relationship.

Tips for Building Caring Relationships

Provide attention and affection

Provide children with smiles and hugs to promote

development of a sense of safety, security, love, belonging and acceptance.

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 imagination, social and physical skills.

Provide comfort

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

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.

Show empathy

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

Promote emotional literacy

Help children learn to identify and express their emotions. Point out that everyone has feelings.

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.

Read, tell stories and 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 and look at photographs.

Identify the child’s strengths...

and use these to encourage growth and development

Promote self-care

Teach children about the importance of healthy eating, exercise and rest.

Additional Resources

Child Trauma Academy
<http://childtrauma.org/>

For more information, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

Copyright © 2024 Center for Inclusive Child Care

These materials may be freely reproduced for educational purposes. Information in this tip sheet has been modified from multiple sources.

Funding provided by the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families.

www.inclusivechildcare.org