



Trauma-Informed Children's Activities

I. Introduction

We now know that many of the parents that we serve in our programs may use drugs, have emotional problems, and have experienced trauma or violence in their lives. This combination makes it difficult for them to trust, ask for and use help, and implement effective parenting practices.

Their children can be affected by stressful events or trauma even when they have not been directly exposed and are not facing any external threat. Children who have witnessed or are victims of violence/trauma have had their sense of trust violated, are likely to have difficulties with emotional self-regulation, and are likely to be hyperaware of potential threats.

Given that the children have parents that are at high risk for experiencing trauma, and given that there is considerable community violence that may also impact the children, we want to help the children feel safe and build resilience. Resilience is a child's ability to cope with the difficulties of life, and to emerge from them stronger than before.

The activities described in this module are designed to increase resilience through Expressing Feelings, Coping with Fears, Expanding Coping Resources, Learning Relaxation and Other Self-Soothing Techniques, Meaning Making and Hope for the Future, and Building Personal Power.

The module is divided into the following three age groups:

- Infant – 5 years;
- 5 years – 8 years; and
- 8 years – 11 years



II. Guidelines

Promoting Safety

- Provide a safe, nurturing, and consistent environment.
- Give children control over some aspects of their day
- Set limits
- Let the children know what will happen next
- Respect physical boundaries – don't assume a child wants to be hugged; take cues from the child before initiating physical contact.

Trauma Reminders

People, situations, places, things (e.g. loud noises) may remind the children of traumatic events. These “triggers” can lead to behaviors that seem out of place in the current situation. For example, a seven-year-old boy whose father and older brother fought physically in front of him becomes frantic and tries to separate classmates playfully wrestling in the schoolyard. It is very difficult for children (and adults) in the midst of a reaction to a trauma reminder to calm themselves, especially if they do not understand why they are experiencing these intense feelings.

When a child is experiencing a trauma reminder, it is important to state clearly and specifically the reasons why the child is now safe. Help the child to discriminate between past experience and the present one.

Deep breathing and other “grounding”/ self-soothing techniques can help. (See list of Grounding Techniques in the Infants – 5 years Section).

Teach children to cope with trauma reminders with **SOS** (National Child Trauma Stress Network):

STOP	Stop and take several deep breaths
ORIENT	Look around and take in immediate surroundings
SEEK HELP	Use a grounding technique to help calm down

Group Rules

Group Rules allow clarity and predictability, basic components of a safe environment for children. Children can suggest rules they would like to have in the group. This establishes the children's ownership of the group and thus empowers them. However, rules that contradict the essential rules should not be accepted. Discuss unacceptable rules and help the children understand why these rules would not benefit the group. Group rules should be written on a colorful poster to serve as a reminder.

Essential Rules: (1) Confidentiality (with the exception of suspicion of child abuse); (2) No physical or verbal abuse or coercion; and (3) Respect for others' opinions, feelings, and personal space (including listening while others talk).



III. Infant to 5 years

Grounding Techniques (Self Soothing)

- Stomping Feet
- Rocking in Glider
- Breathing Techniques
- Music
- Clapping Hands
- Walking/Running
- Jumping Rope
- Stretching
- Tossing Ball (large)
- Drumming
- Cold/Hot Drink
- Shaking out Feet/Hands
- Petting/Holding a Pet
- Humming
- Looking at Fish in Tank
- Blowing Bubbles
- Playing with a Favorite Toy

It's Okay To Be Different

Materials: Book: It's Okay To Be Different, by Todd Parr

Read the book to the group. You can use each page to discuss specific issues such as needing some help, talking about feelings, saying NO to bad things, getting mad, how we are all different in different ways.

When I'm Feeling Scared

Materials: Book: When I'm Feeling Scared, by Trace Moroney

Read the book to the group. You can use each page to discuss specific issues with the children such as how your body reacts to feeling scared, how we all want a "safe place", how some people can scare us, how we each have different things that scare us, and that talking to someone helps.



Hands Are Not For Hitting

Materials: Book: Hands Are Not For Hitting, by Martine Agassi

Read the book aloud to the group. It gives simple, straightforward reasons why hitting is harmful and unhealthy, and encourages the children to think about and practice behaviors that build a sense of self-esteem, self-awareness, respect, caring, responsibility, and fun.



IV. Ages 5 years to 8 years

Check-In Exercise: How Are You Feeling Today?

The purpose of this activity is to teach children to talk about how they feel and to legitimate these feelings. Children choose from a poster describing weather conditions that reflect their feelings; e.g. Sunny, Foggy, Cloudy, Stormy. They then explain to the group why they feel this way today.

Grounding Techniques (Self Soothing)

- Stomping Feet
- Breathing Techniques
- Music
- Clapping Hands
- Walking/Running
- Jumping Rope
- Stretching
- Tossing Ball (large)
- Drumming
- Cold/Hot Drink
- Shaking out Feet/Hands
- Petting/Holding a Pet
- Humming
- Looking at Fish in Tank
- Blowing Bubbles
- Playing with a Favorite Toy
- Naming Favorite TV Shows
- Naming Colors in the Room
- Visualizing a Favorite Safe Place (e.g. Beach in a Warm Sunny Area)
- Naming Favorite Songs

Relaxation

“Now we are going to do a relaxation exercise that will help us calm down and feel better. I’d like everyone to sit quietly and get comfortable in their chair. Listen to my instructions.”

Read the Instructions in a slow, quiet voice, pausing between sentences:

“Close your eyes and listen to the rhythm of your breathing . . .now let us release all the muscles in our bodies and let them relax . . . relax your feet. . . relax your legs . . . relax your hands . . . your shoulders and your neck. . . your face.

Breathe very slowly.

If you’d like to you can tense all your muscles . . . and then let them go.



Tense all your muscles . . . make fists with your hands . . . scrunch up your face . . . tighten your shoulders . . . then your legs.

Hold it. Hold it.

Now let go, and take a slow deep breath.

Let go of all your muscles.

Now your whole body is feeling relaxed.

Stay with that feeling for a moment and enjoy it.

Remember that you can come back here to this feeling whenever you wish.

Now begin to open your eyes . . . move your fingers and your toes and slowly, very slowly come back here to your chair.”

Expressing Feelings and Coping with Fears

Fear is one of the most common emotions experienced by school children and merits special attention. In stressful situations, new fears may crop up or existing ones may intensify. Being able to talk about fears is one way to defuse their potency, and leads to ways of coping and finding solutions.

Feelings

Materials: Book: Glad Monster Sad Monster, by Emberley& Anne Miranda

The book is about feelings with fun monster masks that children can try on and talk about times when they felt glad, sad, loving, worried, silly, angry, and scared – just like the monsters. Each monster is a different color to represent different emotions.

While reading the book to the group, pause and ask children if they feel the same way the monsters do. For example, do they feel angry when someone knocks over their blocks like the red monster.

Make a chart that shows each color monster and emotion from the book (yellow/glad, blue/sad, etc.). Encourage each child to put a mark, write their name or place a sticker beside the monster that shows how they are feeling that day. Count the number of marks to see how many children feel glad, silly, sad, etc. Talk about what they can do to change the way they feel if they marked that they are feeling worried or angry.

Let each child make “feeling monster” stick puppets. Give each child 2 blank paper circles (one yellow/one blue) and ask them to draw a glad monster face on the yellow circle and a sad monster face on the blue circle. Help them glue the monster faces back to back with a popsicle stick in the middle. Talk about or role play different situations and ask children to hold up their glad monster or sad monster puppet according to how they think the monster would feel.



When I'm Feeling Scared

Materials: Book: When I'm Feeling Scared, by Trace Moroney

Read the book to the group. You can use each page to discuss specific issues with the children such as how your body reacts to feeling scared, how we all want a "safe place", how some people can scare us, how we each have different things that scare us, and that talking to someone

You can also ask the children to draw a picture of something that scares them. Then have each child talk about their drawing.

What Hands Can Do

Materials: Draw 2 hands on a large piece of paper. Label one "Help" and the other "Hurt".

Ask the children to think about and discuss how hands can help or hurt. Then write the responses around each of the hands.

(Adapted from Women, Co-Occurring Disorders & Violence Study)

Hands Are Not for Hitting

Materials: Book: Hands Are Not For Hitting, by Martine Agassi

Read the book aloud to the group. It gives simple, straightforward reasons why hitting is harmful and unhealthy, and encourages the children to think about and practice behaviors that build a sense of self-esteem, self-awareness, respect, caring, responsibility, and fun.



STOP – TUCK – THINK

Ask the group to brainstorm reasons why people hit someone else. For example, they may feel left out and sad, they may feel jealous, they may feel angry, they may feel bullied and scared.

Then discuss what other ways we can deal with our feelings, particularly angry feelings. Brainstorm other ways to express feelings.

“Often when we get really angry, we may want to hit, kick, or yell at our friends. We don’t stop to think that we can really hurt someone. Sometimes we need time to stop and think, before we do something we might regret. I’d like to discuss a new way to handle anger. I call it the STOP – TUCK – THINK strategy. When we get angry, it helps to STOP and keep our hands, body, and words to ourselves. Then imagine TUCKING our hands inside our pockets (think like a turtle tucking inside its shell) and take 3 deep breaths to calm down. Then we can think of a better solution.”

Try a role play using the STOP – TUCK – THINK strategy.

(Adapted from NCTSN)

Developing Personal Resources

Problem-Solving: Part One

Materials: Large easel, pad, and markers

“Let’s make a list of some problems we might have. “ Examples: I’m scared of a bully at school. I get mad when my brother takes my things. My sister hits me. Record list on paper and hang up on wall for all children to see.

“Now let’s think of some solutions. How can we do something about these problems? Let’s make another list.” Examples: Get an adult to help. Ask nicely. Say “Please Stop.” Share. Trade toys. Ignore. Record list on paper and hang up next to other sheet.

“Now we can make a third list. What would happen if I did these things. Would it make me feel better? Would it hurt anyone? If it helps and doesn’t hurt anyone, then we might want to give that solution a try.”

You might then want to role play one of the problems and its solution(s).



Problem-Solving: Part Two

“Remember the Problem-Solving Game we played the other day (you could put up the lists from the other day). Now let’s try to use our problem-solving for some new problems.”

“What if you wrote on Mommy’s bedroom wall with a marker? How would you feel? How do you think Mommy would feel? What could you do?”

“What if you knocked over your friend’s tower (art piece) at school? How would you feel? How do you think your friend would feel? What could you do?”

“What if someone at school was teasing you and calling you names? How would you feel? What could you do?”

“What if your brother hit you? How would you feel. How do you think your brother would feel? What could you do?”

Personal Protection Planning (PPP)

Children need to learn to protect themselves from risk both inside and outside their homes. The aim of a personal protection plan (PPP) is to equip the children with some practical, realistic, and usable skills to be used in case of an emergency. Although there is no need to force the possibility of future violence into the child’s consciousness, it can be pointed out as a realistic possibility that requires some consideration.

Each child needs to identify safe places to go or to hide in when he or she feels threatened or senses danger. Inside the home, these places could be the child’s room, a sibling’s room, and the basement. Safe places outside the home could be the homes of neighbors, friends, or relatives. Help the child think of possible places by discussing actual times when he or she felt the need for a safe place.

All children should know how to call the police in case of emergency; in most cases, this number is 911. If possible, each child should have access to phone numbers of trusted relatives, friends, or neighbors who live nearby.

Children can be assisted in writing Personal Protection Cards that contain a list of safe places and phone numbers. After the work on the card is completed, laminate it. You also may want to practice calling the 911 number, using either a toy phone or a disconnected phone. This activity may evoke strong feelings in the children, especially for those who have had a previous experience with the police coming to their homes. Remind children this is only an exercise and help the ones who are triggered to use their grounding techniques.

Finding Hidden Treasures:

It is important to reinforce children’s awareness of the good forces in their lives. These positive forces may be people in their lives such as parents, other family members, friends, or teachers. They may be possessions that help them feel better such as a blanket, stuffed animals, toys or pets that help them.



In these exercises we want to help the children focus on resources they currently have and use, and help them expand their repertoire.

Materials: Provide each child with a covered box (shoe box)
Materials to decorate the box (papers, ribbons, sequins, feathers, glue)
10 yellow 4-5 cm. circles cut from construction paper

Open with a class discussion: “Everyone of us has difficult or sad moments, worries, and unpleasant situations. But we are also surrounded by many good things like games, toys, activities we enjoy, and people like our parents, relatives, teachers, and friends who make us happy and look after us when we are feeling unhappy or sad. We can think of all of these as our own hidden treasures.”

Ask the children to talk about unpleasant situations and what they find helpful when they are in them. Emphasize the various ways there are of coping – the “treasures” that each child has – and note the differences between them. “Today we are going to make coins which we will save in our treasure chests. I’m going to give each of you some coins and I want you to draw or color something nice on each one – a person, a thing, a game, an activity. Think about the kinds of things that help you when you are feeling sad or lonely or worried.”

Give the children plenty of time to color their coins and talk about what they did.

“Now we are going to make treasure chests out of the boxes so you can keep all the coins that make you happy inside it. Decorate the boxes in any way you like using the materials you see here. Bring me the lids of the boxes so I can make a slot for the coins.

When everyone is finished, the children can put their coins into their treasure chests. Remind the children that they can add more coins at any time. Start a discussion and ask the children to share the feelings and experiences they had while doing this activity.

(Adapted from Israel Center for Treatment of Psychotrauma, 2005)

Meaning Making and Hope

Materials: Magazines, scissors, glue, crayons, sheets of white paper, markers

“Sometimes we are so busy with our day we forget about the things we enjoy and that the things that give us strength. Today we will make something that will remind us of these things that gives us strength and hope. Some of these things are fun things we like to do; others remind us of what is important to us. We have all sorts of materials to use in making a collage. Think of things that are meaningful to you. You can use a symbol if you don’t find exactly what you want. When you have finished gathering all the pictures you want, cut and paste them into a collage on the white sheet of paper. You can also draw, write, or add captions.”

When all the children have completed their collages, each child can show the collage he/she made and explain it. At the end sum up all the different kinds of meaning and hope: spending time with family, watching a movie, reading a book, praying, helping a friend, playing a sport, being with someone we like, etc. We know that these things really can help someone who is having a hard time.



V. Ages 8 years to 11 years

Check-In Exercise: How Are You Feeling Today ?

The purpose of this activity is to teach children to talk about how they feel and to legitimize these feelings. Ask the children to discuss the “highs” and “lows” of the previous week and why. It is important to allow each child adequate time when checking in.

Grounding Techniques (Self Soothing)

- Stomping Feet
- Breathing Techniques
- Music
- Clapping Hands
- Walking/Running
- Jumping Rope
- Stretching
- Tossing Ball (large)
- Drumming
- Cold/Hot Drink
- Shaking out Feet/Hands
- Petting/Holding a Pet
- Humming
- Looking at Fish in Tank
- Blowing Bubbles
- Playing with a Favorite Toy
- Naming Favorite TV Shows
- Naming Colors in the Room
- Visualizing a Favorite Safe Place (e.g. Beach in a Warm Sunny Area)
- Naming Favorite Songs

Expressing Feelings and Coping with Fears

What Hands Can Do

Ask the children to trace both their hands on paper. Ask them to think about how hands can help or hurt, to write their thoughts around each of the hands, and then to decorate them. Give each child time after they have completed their drawing to show it to the group and speak about what they wrote around their hands.



STOP – TUCK – THINK

Ask the group to brainstorm reasons why people hit someone else. For example, they may feel left out and sad, they may feel jealous, they may feel angry, they may feel bullied and scared.

Then discuss what other ways we can deal with our feelings, particularly angry feelings. Brainstorm other ways to express feelings.

“Often when we get really angry, we may want to hit, kick, or yell at our friends. We don’t stop to think that we can really hurt someone. Sometimes we need time to stop and think, before we do something we might regret. I’d like to discuss a new way to handle anger. I call it the STOP – TUCK – THINK strategy. When we get angry, it helps to STOP and keep our hands, body, and words to ourselves. Then imagine TUCKING our hands inside our pockets (think like a turtle tucking inside its shell) and take 3 deep breaths to calm down. Then we can think of a better solution.”

Try a role play using the STOP – TUCK – THINK strategy.

(Adapted from NCTSN)

Developing Personal Resources

Problem-Solving: Part One

Materials: Large easel, pad, and markers

“We are going to do a brainstorming exercise. Let’s make a list of some problems we might have.” Examples: I’m scared of a bully at school. I get mad when my team doesn’t win. My older brother hits me.

Record list on the easel and hang up on the wall for everyone to see.

“Now let’s think of some solutions. How can we do something about these problems? Let’s make another list.” Examples: Get an adult to help. Say “Please Stop”. Talk about my feelings with my team and coach.

Record list on paper and hang up next to first sheet.

“Now we can make a third list. What would happen if I did these things? Would it make me feel better? Would it hurt someone else? If it helps and doesn’t hurt, then we might want to give that solution a try.”

You then might want to role play one of the problems and its solution(s).

Problem-Solving: Part Two

“Remember to Problem-Solving Exercise we did the other day (you could put up lists from the other day). Now let’s use our problem-solving for some new problems. I’m going to hand you some paper and each one of you



think of a problem (1 or 2 if you wish) and write it down in the first column.

Then brainstorm all the possible solutions you can think of and record them in the second column.” Give them 10 minutes and see if everyone has completed. If not, give them a few more minutes.

“Now go through your list of solutions and rate whether it helps or hurts someone.”

Ask if anyone would like to share their problem-solving. If not, reinforce the idea that it is okay to keep some things private. If some children do want to, try to keep enough time for all of them to do so.

What Makes You Feel Better?

“Everyone of us has difficult or sad moments, worries, and unpleasant situations. But we also have activities we enjoy and people we like who makes us happy. Let’s each make a list of things that make us feel better , such as reading, hiking, playing sports, being with friends, being with family.” Give them 5 minutes to complete. Then ask each child to share their list.

When everyone has completed, remind them that they now have a personal list of things and people that make them feel better. Remind them to keep their lists and use them when they are feeling down.

Relaxation Exercise

“Now we are going to do a relaxation exercise. I’d like you all to lie down comfortably on the floor. Make sure you each have room to stretch out without touching each other. Listen to my instructions.”

“Close your eyes and listen to the rhythm of your breathing.

Let’s move very slowly and try to feel each and every muscle in your body.

Start with your hands . . . Visualize your right hand from the tip of your pinky through all your fingers, all the way to your elbow . . . from there to your right shoulder. Everywhere you go, continue to breathe deeply and visualize your body parts and muscles letting go and relaxing . . . becoming softer . . warmer . . . heavier.

Move around to your left shoulder and down to your left arm...from there to your wrist, your hand . . . and fingers.

Move back to your shoulders, and slowly go up your neck . . . continue relaxing into each part of your body.

Move up to your head . . . to your scalp . . . to your forehead . . . your eyebrows and eyes . . ears . . lips and mouth. . . to your chin. Relax all the muscles.

Notice your heartbeat . . . move to your stomach.

Notice how your whole body is relaxing . . . feeling good.



Now move down your right leg . . . to the knee. . . .ankle, heel, to the foot, toes. Now move to your left leg. Down to the knee, ankle, heel, foot, to the ends of your toes.

Now your whole body is feeling relaxed and calm. Stay with that feeling for a moment or two and enjoy it. Remember you can come back here whenever you wish. Now move out slowly and quietly . . .begin to let your eyes open . . . move your fingers and toes and slowly, very slowly, come back to the room.”

Ask how they feel after the relaxation exercise. Ask what did they think or feel while they were doing the relaxation exercise.