

Supporting Young Children That Have Been Exposed to Highly Stressful or Traumatic Experiences (and ones that haven't too!)

CONNECTING, CO-REGULATING & RELATING (creating safe relationships where children can be seen & heard)

- ▣ take time to notice the feelings, beliefs and values we bring to our relationships with children
 - ◆ we all want to be the best parents, foster parents, educators, clinicians and providers we can be; to do that, it helps to explore and reflect on feelings that come up for us when we are confronted with behaviors and situations that result in feelings of frustration (stress!)
- ▣ don't take anything personally
- ▣ acknowledge children's experience and validate feelings (also see "be thoughtful about he limits we set..." on the last page)
 - ◆ for example we might say, "I can see you're mad because you wanted to have ice cream" (which doesn't mean we still don't set the limit)
 - ◆ talk about and assist children to label and identify their feelings (we can even label feelings for an infant!)
 - ◆ if it isn't obvious, may not want to assume we know everything a child is feeling; for example, we might say "it seems like you're feeling angry" or, "I wonder if you're feeling sad"
 - ◆ provide opportunities for children to express their feelings (movement, painting, music)
- ▣ find time to stop and listen to what children are saying
- ▣ be aware of facial expressions, as well as tone and volume of voice; we pay much more attention to body language (what we see and feel) than the words we hear
- ▣ be thoughtful about the use of physical contact with children
 - ◆ safe touch is important for children, but can be threatening for some children depending on their experiences and/or ability to process sensory input (light touch, for example, may be very uncomfortable for some children)
- ▣ be thoughtful about our physical size and the appearance of our gestures
 - ◆ sometimes we can be intimidating without even meaning to just because we are so much larger than young children
 - ◆ some of our gestures, such as raising an arm or hand, could feel threatening to some children depending on their experience

REGULATING/CALMING IDEAS (will allow children to feel safe, regulated & take in information)

- ▣ children need consistency and predictability
 - ◆ develop/maintain consistent and predictable daily routines and activities; refer to a visual schedule at the beginning and periodically throughout the day as needed
 - ◆ cues (visual and auditory) that are unique to each transition in the child's day help make activities or routines more predictable (not knowing what's coming next can cause anxiety!)



- ◆ consistency is important in terms of the physical, but also the *relational* environment, where consistency of caregivers is as important as consistency in the way caregivers respond to children
- ▣ anticipate possible triggers related to the child's experience that might activate their stress response, sending them into high arousal
- ▣ address fears when appropriate
 - ◆ reassure them (to the extent possible) that they are safe
- ▣ provide quiet/private spaces
 - ◆ if a child finds quiet space helpful, teach the child how to use those spaces when they are overwhelmed, over stimulated or simply need some quiet time
- ▣ offer ample opportunities for messy (sensory) play
 - ◆ sand, water, finger paints, shaving cream, lotion, etc.
- ▣ proprioceptive input (input to muscles, bone joints and connective tissue) can help calm the nervous system
 - ◆ try activities such as play dough play; carrying around, pushing or pulling heavy objects; bear hugs; pillow sandwiches; jumping games; always read children's cues and respect what doesn't seem helpful to them
 - ◆ be aware that for some children, some types of proprioceptive input can excite the nervous system (sends them into high arousal)
- ▣ offer ample opportunities for patterned and repetitive sensory input (see box on last page)
 - ◆ patterned and repetitive sensory input is calming for children and helps organize the nervous system (decreases arousal level); examples are walking, drumming, many types of music, rocking, action songs, simple movement games (like ring-around-the-rosy) and relaxation activities like full body breathing
- ▣ simple games that create structure and reduce chaos are organizing
 - ◆ for example, age-appropriate puzzles, patterned block play, sorting and matching games
- ▣ spend time outside at parks, playgrounds and, in general, out in nature

POSITIVE & EMPOWERING EXPERIENCES (helps children develop positive beliefs about themselves including their sense of confidence and competence)

- ▣ find opportunities to empower children
 - ◆ create opportunities for children to be successful in relation to completing tasks, in social situations, and in their play
 - ◆ during play, try following a child's lead by letting them direct the play
 - ◆ offer choices when possible
- ▣ teach skills and, where developmentally appropriate, include the children in problem solving
 - ◆ rather than offer immediate solutions to challenges that come up for children, include them in the solution (for example, if two children are fighting over a toy, we might say, "Hmm, there's only one toy here and you both want it, I wonder what we should do?")



- ▣ stop, notice, and comment on what children are doing
 - ◆ simply noticing and expressing lots of interest in what a child is doing is as meaningful or more meaningful than praise
 - ◆ look for opportunities to notice when a child is behaving well and be specific in your comments (“thank you for listening so well”)
- ▣ offer brief and honest explanations to children that are appropriate to their age
- ▣ be thoughtful about the limits we set and how we set them
 - ◆ set only those limits that you are willing to enforce and that are necessary
 - ◆ remember to let children know what they can do, not just what they can not do
 - ◆ when setting a limit, try following these steps (**ACT**):
 - A**cknowledge the child’s feelings, wishes and wants
 - C**ommunicate the limit
 - T**arget acceptable alternatives

For example, if a child begins to climb up onto a table, you can say: "I know you want to climb on there, that looks like fun (**Acknowledge the child’s feelings, wishes and wants**), but this table isn't for climbing (**Communicate the limit**). You can climb up on the gym when we go outside (**Target acceptable alternatives**)."

Garry Landreth (1991)

In general, the way we respond to children who are dysregulated, and the activities we choose to help calm (regulate) and organize them, should consider these elements:

relational – we grow and heal in the context of safe, loving & stable relationships; particularly crucial for young children, but throughout our lifespan as well

repetitive – repetition is how we learn; repetition also creates familiarity which makes us feel safe; repeated positive experiences with a caring adult can begin to heal stressful or traumatic experiences

rhythmic – rhythmic sound and movement is calming

relevant – how we respond to children should take into account the child’s temperament, experience and developmental levels (which may or may not be the same as their age level)

rewarding – beneficial for the child; engagement that is mutually enjoyable for child & caregiver

respectful – of the individual, family and communities culture

Adapted from Seibel, Britt, Gillespie, & Parlakian (2006); and Barfield, Dobson, Gaskell & Perry (2012)

*Remember, every child is different;
we need to pay attention to each child’s unique needs.*

