

Healing Trauma In Children

Information and Activity Handbook
for Parents and Caregivers



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and "Trauma Through Child's Eyes" by P. Levine and M. Kline ®

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Dear parents and caregivers,

We understand that it is almost impossible for someone from the outside to imagine the horrors of war and the hardship of living in a refugee camp.

Through this handbook, we would like to make the lives of your children a little bit easier by giving you some information about trauma and what you can do to help, with or without professionals, whom there might be a lack of.

On the following pages, you can find concepts, skills and activities that were designed for the parents of traumatized children to help release the energy of the overwhelming traumatic events.

You are probably naturally doing some of what is written here. Therefore, please, feel free to find more inspiration and choose whatever suits you or your child or adapt it to their specific needs

Sincerely,
Czech People for Syria, z.s.
Humanitarian Initiative

Healing Trauma In Children

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for Parents and Caregivers

I. Trauma can be helped

Sadly, there is war, migration and other catastrophic events. They are scary and extremely painful, but they do not have to cause trauma. Trauma is not measured by the magnitude of the event. It is measured by the level of overwhelm to a person's physiology. Infants and young children are, of course, the most vulnerable because of their immature physiology that is still developing. However, no matter how life-threatening the circumstances, the symptoms of trauma can be alleviated or prevented by discharging the heightened levels of self-protective arousal in the autonomic nervous and musculoskeletal systems of the body. When relief in the form of SE First Aid is available within the first months after food, water, medicine and safe shelter are established, trauma does not have to be a fact of life.

Again, we would not like to underplay the suffering and complexity of surviving a war. At the same time, we would like to deliver the message that trauma can be helped. If parents and other caregivers learn how to support traumatized children to help them release the traumatic energy (mostly through play, please see all the activities further), the children can recover.

Does my child need this kind of help? How can I tell that he/she suffers from trauma? How does it show up?

In babies and small children, you will see clinging, fits of anger, biting and hitting, head-aches and stomach-aches, fear to try new things, withdrawal and avoiding activities, throwing toys, fast changes in play, sleep problems, hyperactivity, pale skin and letargy, preoccupation with the traumatic event and the related stress and charged-up emotions.

In older children, the increased tension can be observed as guardedness, fidgeting, "restless leg," fast talking, darting eyes, anxiety, agitation, distractibility and „looking for a fight." The contrary, immobility and feelings of helplessness can be seen in their collapsed posture (they look like rag dolls). There is a lack of initiative or motivation, listlessness, failure to complete anything, depression, difficulty moving to new tasks, and a sense of lifelessness. The most common somatic problems are chronic stomach aches and headaches and/or neck and back pain. And, then, there is dissociation (the inability to feel the body and a poor connection to our inner experiences), which shows up as daydreaming, numbness, distractibility, "head in the clouds," blank stare, inattention, denial of reality, and an inability to connect with others.

All of the above are normal reactions to trauma and with care, they can and will change!

What is trauma?

Trauma happens when any intense experience strikes a child out of the blue or can be the result of ongoing fear and nervous tension. It is simply anything that is „too much“, anything they are not able to cope with.

At the root of the traumatic reaction are the oldest and deepest structures of the brain, responsible for survival. In danger, to protect us and our loved ones, these brain structures activate an extraordinary amount of energy for fight or flight. When this energy is stuck in the system, later, even simple reminders of the traumatic event bring the same alarmed feelings, continually turning on a survival system for acute emergencies, even though the danger is over and we are safe.

To heal from trauma, this energy needs to be accessed and used up in a slow, regulated way, it does not go away itself. When it is not fully discharged, it remains as a kind of ”body memory“, creating repeated traumatic symptoms.

What can I do?

First of all, you can create a safe place for the child’s tears and fears, in which they can release the traumatic charge. Even in the difficult environment of the refugee camp, you can do it with your full, kind attention and your reassuring touch. It is as if you become a container for what they are feeling. This simply means that you calmly listen and acknowledge that you are present for their feelings, without judging them or trying to fix them.

Children are both fragile and resistant, they have an innate ability to heal. Therefore, to help them recover from trauma, you will be something like a band-aid or a splint, which support, protect and let restore.

Here are a few first concepts to help you be a good support:

When dealing with powerful trauma emotions, assure your child that any such emotions are normal! Help them understand that the distress they are feeling will gradually go away. Children are comforted and empowered by knowing that it will not hurt forever.

You can say something like: ”I will stay here with you until that shaky, numb, etc. feelings wear off, just let it all go, let the shaking/crying happen, you are

doing good, you are going to be fine. It could be that some more tears will come, I will stay here with you until the last one is gone.“ Shaking might be scary, but it is the best understood way of extinguishing fear and discharging the energy mobilized for fight-or-flight. Therefore, when it happens, do not fear it, let yourself and your children shake, it will help! When it gets too intense, you can try to calm it down a bit. By calm voice, slowing gestures, but just gently.

When the child is traumatized, almost nothing feels safe. So, you will be looking for ways to make them feel safer. Each moment counts. It can be done by giving them a favorite toy or a warm blanket, by holding, rocking and hugging or by any safe touch that the child responds to in a positive way. Some examples of a healing touch: a solid embrace, gentle pressure (like when puppies play), tickle, gentle squeeze of the nose, clapping hands, touch on the arms, shoulders or the back, gentle play with the hair. For the same reason, if you can, read or tell a regular bedtime story.

With the home away and families torn apart, children will keep coming with complaints of headaches or stomach pains, sometimes accompanied by fevers or other symptoms. All of these symptoms are common in post-disaster situations. It is very important to normalize these symptoms too by saying something like: "This is to be expected, if you have been through a very frightening, painful experience, the pain and fear temporarily settle in a part of you body“. And, you can always gently place your hand on where the unpleasant feeling inside the body is, it usually helps).

- Traumatized children will struggle as to their social behavior, but they are not bad and do not act maliciously! With help, they will get better!
- In order to give appropriate support to an overwhelmed child, it is important that you are calm enough to do it. In difficult situations, when dealing with the child's difficult emotions, you will also be dealing with your own. Please, take the time to tend to your own reactions first. It is very important. Unless the child is in danger, STOP first, and take time to settle (see the guide further).

Please, remember that children have magical imagination. When something bad happens, it is a disadvantage as they cannot make a realistic assessment. So, sometimes, their imaginations run wild and children picture a variety of worst-case scenarios. They worry about the pain and hurt of others, as well as about their own safety and are often afraid that the bad experience will happen again, even if highly unlikely. So, it is very important to find out

what exactly they are worried about. If you don't ask, you will not know the hidden burden they are carrying unnecessarily. Then, the worries need to be addressed. Some are reality-based, some are fantasies.

Strong survival energy can be directed into specific physical activities (see further). This type of release helps complete the incomplete responses from the traumatic event.

- Whatever activity you will be planning for your child (see the activity part of the handbook), the most important is that they feel strength, power, fun and competency (i.e. being good at something – a talent, hobby, craft or some other way to escape misery). The pleasure of play itself improves the brain chemistry.
- In order to help calm the child down after any of the activities listed further, you can use a soft blanket. Gently cover the child in it so that he/she can feel their boundaries and feel safe.

II. Sensations and Feelings

It is because the body bears the burden of trauma that the model in this book involves helping kids notice and work through their body sensations and feelings. One of our aims is to make children aware of what different things make them feel and to teach them move through the difficult sensations and feelings. The purpose of the following exercise is to understand what we mean by that. Also, it might help you to learn to calm down naturally, so that you can be calmer under any pressure.

The very principle of settling down is that *what goes up* (charge, excitement, fear) *can come down* (discharge, relaxation, security), if we let it. The analogy sometimes used is that of a metal spring. If you pull it apart, the coil naturally rebounds to its original size and shape.

At first, it may be difficult to stay focused on unpleasant feelings, but each time we do it becomes a bit easier. It is important to stay there long enough for the sensation to change, as it will. With practice, your body is able to hold (and „contain“) more sensation and emotion without getting stressed.

Exercise: Noticing sensations

- Find a comfortable place to sit.
- What do you notice in your body now?
- Where in your body do you feel it?

- As you pay attention to that sensation, what happens next?
- How does it change?
- What else are you noticing?
- Would you be willing to explore how your body might want to move?
- Would you be willing to focus on that feeling with a sense of curiosity about, what might happen next?
- What are the qualities of that sensation?
- Does it have a size? Shape? Color? Weight?
- Does it spread? Notice the direction it moves.
- Does it go from inward to outward or vice versa?
- Do you notice a center point? An edge?
- What happens in the rest of your body?
- When you feel that, how does it affect you now?
- What happens next? (even if you feel „stuck“)
- As you follow that sensation, where does it go? How does it change?
- Allow yourself to enjoy that sensation as you would like.
- Now, take a little time to let any activation (charged-up feelings) settle down. Think for a moment about the enclosed glass containers with a winter scene inside that you shake up to make white flakes move and look like it is snowing. In order to settle, it does not help to get all shook up again. Instead, it takes a little quiet time of stillness and calm, just like with the snow scene, for the settling to occur. As you continue to settle, place both feet on the floor to help you feel grounded. Next, direct your attention to something in the room that brings comfort. Notice how you are feeling in your body now.

The words below can help you to name the strange new feelings from inside you:

cold, warm, hot, chilly, twitchy, butterflies, sharp, dull, itchy, shaky, tremble, tingly, hard, soft, stuck, jittery, icy, weak, relaxed, calm, peaceful, empty, full, dry, moist, flowing, spreading, strong, tight, tense, dizzy, fuzzy, blurry, numb, prickly, jumpy, owie, tearful, goose-bumpy, light, heavy, open, tickly, cool, silky, still, clammy, loose...

When we experience our sensations consciously, we can begin to move out of one state and into another. In horrifying situations, distressing sensations may become stuck and it is this movement from fixity to flow that frees us from the grip of trauma.

In case you become "stuck" or frozen on an unpleasant sensation, emotion, thought or disturbing image, take the time to look around, move and take notice of an object, movement, thought, person, pet or natural feature that makes you feel better. Take some time to sense how you are feeling better and where those sensations are located inside you. Then briefly "touch in" to the place in your body where you were previously stuck and notice what feeling you are having now.

Note: one of the sensations that help children to heal is the sensation of strength, which they most easily experience in the muscles, bones and stomach. When they run, hop, jump, skip, dance and perform somersaults, they experience strength and agility. And, strength is experienced as the ability to defend oneself, which is so important to counteract the feelings of helplessness (so usual with trauma). Therefore, anytime you can, look for opportunities for your child to experience and be aware of the powerful feelings of strength.

III. First Aid for Trauma Prevention and Healing, A Step-By-Step Guide

The best prevention and treatment of trauma that we know is to guide the child through their overwhelming sensations and emotions. Without the support of caring adults, children brace themselves against these difficult sensations. And, this bracing prevents the completion of the activation cycle necessary to restore the sense of safety.

Trauma prevention and healing is about helping your child to release the energy that was stirred up during their upset, or, in other words, to deactivate the energy of "fight or flight". The following guide is to be used immediately after a traumatizing event to prevent post-traumatic symptoms, in cases when traumatic symptoms are reactivated, or when difficult sensations or emotions arise when using the further offered methods and activities.

1. Check your own body's responses first.

Take time to notice your own fear or concern. Next, take a full deep breath, and as you exhale s-l-o-w-l-y, feel the sensations in your own body. If you still feel upset, repeat until you feel settled. Feel your feet, ankles and legs, noticing how they make contact with the ground. The time it takes to establish a sense of calm is time well spent. It will increase your capacity to help your child. Also, you will not frighten or confuse the child further (they are very sensitive to the emotional states of adults, particularly their parents).

2. Assess the situation.

If the child shows signs of shock (glazed eyes, pale skin, rapid or shallow pulse and breathing, disorientation, is overly emotional or overly tranquil, i.e. acting like nothing has happened), do not allow him/her to jump up and run away. You might say something like this: "Dear, you're safe now. . . but you're still in shock (or a bit shaken up). I will stay here with you until the shock wears off. It's important to stay still for a little while, even though you might want to go." A calm, confident voice communicates to your child that you know what's best.

3. As the shock wears off, guide the child's attention to his sensations.

Indications of coming out of shock include some color returning to the skin, a slowing down and/or deepening of the breath, tears or some expression returning to the eyes (which may have seemed blank before). When you see one or more of these signs, softly ask your child how he feels "in his body." Next, repeat their answer as a question — "You feel okay in your body?" — and wait for a nod or other response. Be more specific with the next question: "How do you feel in your tummy (head, arm, leg, etc.)?" If he/she mentions a distinct sensation (such as "It feels tight or hurts"), gently ask about its location, size, shape, color or weight (e.g. heavy or light). Keep guiding your child to stay with the present moment with questions such as, "How does the rock (sharpness, lump, 'owie,' sting) feel now?" If he/she is too young or too startled to talk, have him point to where it hurts. (Remember that children tend to describe sensations with metaphors such as "hard as a rock" or "butterflies.")

4. Slow down and follow the child's pace by careful observation of changes.

Timing is everything! This may be the hardest part for the adult; but it's the most important part for the child. Providing a minute or two of silence between questions allows restorative physiological cycles to engage. Too many questions asked too quickly disrupt the natural course that leads to resolution. Your calm presence and patience are sufficient to facilitate the movement and release of excess energy.

This process cannot be rushed. Look for cues that let you know a cycle has finished, such as a deep, relaxed, spontaneous breath, the cessation of crying or trembling, a stretch, a yawn, a smile or the making of eye contact.

The completion of this cycle may not mean that the recovery process is over. Wait to see if another cycle begins or if there is a sense of enough for now. Keep the child focused on sensations for a few more minutes just to make sure the process is complete. If he/she seems tired, stop. There will be other opportunities later to complete the process.

5. Keep validating the child's physical responses.

Resist the impulse to stop the child's tears or trembling, while reminding him/her that whatever has happened is over and that he/she will be OK. The child's reactions need to continue until they stop on their own. This part of the natural cycle usually takes from one to several minutes. Studies have shown that children who are able to cry and tremble after an accident have fewer problems recovering from it over the long term. Your task is to convey to your child through word and touch that crying and trembling are normal, healthy reactions! A reassuring hand on the back, shoulder or arm, along with a few gently spoken words as simple as "That's OK" or "That's right, just let the scary stuff shake right out of you" will help immensely.

6. Trust in the child's innate ability to heal.

As you become more comfortable with your own feelings, it will be easier to relax and follow your child's lead. Your main function, once the process has begun, is to not disrupt it! Trust your child's innate ability to heal. Trust your own ability to allow this to happen. If it helps you in letting go, take a moment to reflect on and feel the presence of a higher power or the remarkable perfection of nature guiding you in the ordinary miracle of healing. Your task is to "stay with" the child. Your balanced presence makes a safe container for him/her to release the tears, fears and any strange new feelings. Use a calm voice and reassuring hand to let them know that they are on the right track. To avoid unintentional disruption of the process, don't shift the child's position, distract their attention, hold them too tightly or position yourself too close or too far away for comfort. Notice when the child begins to look around to see what's happening with a sense of curiosity. This type of checking out the surroundings is called "orienting" and is a sign of resolution. It is a sign of completion, or letting go, of the stressful energy produced in response to the scary event.

7. Encourage your child to rest even if he/she doesn't want to.

Deep discharge and processing of the event generally continue during rest and sleep. Do not start discussion about what happened by asking questions in this stage. Later, though, the child may want to tell a story about what happened, draw a picture or play it through. If a lot of energy was mobilized, the release will continue. The next cycle may be too subtle to notice, but this resting stage allows the body to gently vibrate, give off heat and go through skin color changes and such, as the nervous system returns to relaxation and equilibrium. Dreams, also, can help move the body through the necessary physiological changes. These changes happen naturally, you try to provide a calm, quiet environment.

8. The final step is to attend to your child's emotional responses and help him/her make sense of what happened.

Later, when the child is rested and calm, maybe the next day, find some time to talk about their feelings and what they experienced. Begin by asking what happened. Children often feel anger, fear, sadness, worry, embarrassment, shame or guilt. Help them know that those feelings are OK and that you understand. Listen carefully and reflect back what was said so that the child is sure that you heard and understood. Do not try to fix or change the feelings! Trust that feelings change by themselves when parents or other supportive adults can stay with the child in this zone of uneasiness. This kind of support makes the unpleasant tolerable and improves the ability of children to withstand frustration without falling apart.

Tell the child about a time when you or someone else had a similar experience and/or felt the same way. This will encourage them to say what they are feeling. It also helps them not to feel weird or defective because of what happened or because of their reactions. Let your child know by your actions that whatever he/she is feeling is accepted by you and worthy of your time and attention. Make time for storytelling or the details of the incident to see if there are residual feelings. Drawing, painting and working with clay (see the activity chapter) can be very helpful in releasing strong emotions. If you notice your child becoming overly upset at any point, again guide them to their sensations in order to help the distress pass. You can continue the recovery process through play at this stage.

The Purpose of Touch When Helping a Child in Shock

A parent's touch can either help or interrupt the normal cycle for coming out of shock (or another stuck feeling), depending on how the touch is applied. If you are caring for an infant or young child, hold them safely on your lap. If it is an older child, you can place one hand on their shoulder, arm or middle of the back. Physical proximity of a caring adult can help a child to feel more secure. Remember not to hold your child too tightly as this will interfere with the natural discharge.

The intention when touching the child is to convey:

1. Acceptance
2. Safety and warmth so that the child knows he is not alone
3. Connection to your calm
4. Confidence that you can help them surrender to their feelings and involuntary reactions as they move towards relief and release by not interrupting the process due to your own fears.

Your body language is more important than knowing what to say. We read each other's body language to assess the seriousness of a situation, especially in emergency. Your children not only read your expression but rely on it for their sense of safety. This means that the look on your face and your posture can foster either safety or terror. You want to minimize unnecessary upset, to be a steady support. So, be mindful of your own involuntary responses. You can practice the First Aid on yourselves during any stressful events. Track your sensations until you feel a sense of relief and completion. With practice, it will take shorter and shorter.

The Power of Language

When something dramatic happens, we are very sensitive. The words and tone of voice of others can either calm us down or make us more tense. So, use them wisely. Use your tone of voice to show the child that you understand what they feel. Say something to:

- Ensure that your child feels safe and connected, rather than alone. "I will stay here with you until the feeling wears off."
- Reassure him/her that whatever happened is over (if it is). "It is over now, it is over."
- Help "move time ahead" from the past to the present by guiding them to notice sensations until there is a discharge and shift. "And, what does you

feel now?”

- Remind the child of resources to help him to cope (see the chapter on resources)

Exercise: Power of Words

Words are powerful when they are spoken and in times of vulnerability they become etched in our memory. Take a moment now to recall such words to see how penetrating they are and how they have textured your life.

1. Write a paragraph or two using all of your senses to describe everything you can remember about a kind person who used words, touch, gestures and/or actions to comfort and soothe you after something bad happened.
2. Recall what you just wrote and notice, how you are feeling in your body now. Take some time to focus on sensations, emotions, thoughts and images. Notice what happens to your body and posture as you sink into the experience in this moment. Notice which sensations let you know that this memory was pleasant.

IV. Activities

In this chapter, we have put together different kinds of activities that you can do with your children to help them release the traumatic energy and to experience power, strength and competency. As there are natural differences in what children like, differences related to the age and the kind and depth of the wound, please go through the activities and choose whatever suits you and your child the best.

1. Simple Grounding and Centering Exercises

Simple poems (you can also make up your own) can support recovery, because children like them and they can be used to build and rediscover strengths that may have been lost or that the kids did not know they had. Your children can draw illustrations to go with the verses that reflect their own resilience and strength.

The Magic in Me Tree Exercise

Have children stand up with sufficient space to move their arms like swaying branches. Read the following poem as children pretend that they are big

strong trees (maybe their favorite ones), with roots that grow deep into the earth.

Note: You can find or create your own poems.

*We are going to play, but before we begin
I want you to find your own magic within
Just take some time to see and to feel
All the great things that your body can be.*

*Pretend you are a tree with your branches so high
That you can reach up and tickle the sky
What's it like to be strong like a big old oak tree?
With roots in your feet and your leaves waving free?*

*Now that you are connected to the earth and the sky
It may make you laugh, it may make you cry
It does not matter when you go with the flow
With your branches up high, your roots way down low.*

*Hear the breath in your body, if you listen it sings.
Now you are ready for whatever life brings.*

Suggestion: Give children sufficient time to stomp their feet and feel their "roots" as they connect to the ground. Then, have them wave their arms, feeling themselves bend and sway with resilience as the wind blows. Encourage them to hold their arms way up high, swaying to and fro to and from side to side, noticing how close to the ground they can get before they lose their balance. You can also play music of various tempos. Children can experience different paces and rhythms, imagining gentle breezes and tropical storms. After modeling a few different movements, encourage children to create their own. Make sure that their feet are making good contact with the ground, no standing on the toes.

Choo-Choo-Stomp

Have children form trains by resting their hands on the waist of the person in front of them. Have the trains take very short vigorous steps, lifting their feet only a few inches from the floor and bringing them down in a satisfying thump. Move around the room with the energy and momentum of a locomotive. Have them chant "choo-choo-stomp", enjoying until slightly tired.

This exercise brings energy down to the feet and lowers the center of gravity to create stability very quickly. It also creates strength, presence and attention. For variations, have little trains couple together to form a big one or have children drop their hands so that they can be their own train, moving singly.

For teenagers, a great way to ground is to put on some tribal music with a good beat and have them dance, creating their own chants.

A Simple Centering Exercise

Have children stand (with or without music), feel the connection of their feet to the floor, then bend their knees to lower the center of gravity, creating a feeling of greater stability. Next, have them sway, shifting their weight gently from side to side, from foot to foot. Direct their attention to the sense of going off balance and coming back into balance by finding their center of gravity. After they have explored this movement for a while, have them repeat and share the sensations they feel in each position. They can point to the place in their body where they feel centered. For most, it will be in the area near the navel, about two inches inside the body. Next, repeat with moving forward and backward.

2. Simple sports activities

Ball Buddies (for small children)

This is a simple activity to improve both coordination and social skills for very young children. All that's needed is a ball to roll and a pair of children seated on the floor facing each other about three feet apart (or closer if this is too difficult). The children are instructed to spread their legs open to catch the ball as it is rolled toward them. Each child takes a turn to roll and catch, continuing the game back and forth. As their coordination improves, adjust the challenge level by having the children move further apart. Ask them to look at their partner first to make sure that they are ready to catch the ball. This game usually results in lots of glee and laughter as it aids children in learning non-verbal communication skills, as well as shared joy.

Note: On other occasions, have the children throw the ball to each other. In this case, some war-traumatized children might freeze rather than catch the ball. If it happens, they will need assistance to come out of the frozen state.

Roller Ball (for small children)

A simple game that can be played by three or more kids (four to ten years of age) has each participant roll a ball towards one of the other children. It can be asked that the "roller" call out the name of the child that he is rolling the ball to. This is an excellent way to combine motor and cognitive functions. As the kids do this for a while, a second ball is introduced, requiring more coordination and flexible orientation. It also builds up the level of excitement. This can be done with three or more balls, but it is necessary to ensure that the kids are not being overstimulated.

The Pretend Jump Rope

This game gives kids an opportunity to run forward (rather than away from) something that creates activation and to experience a successful escape. No jump rope is needed, this game is done as a pantomime. Two children or adults hold a pretend jump rope while the others line up for a turn just like in regular jump rope. First the rope is swung back and forth at a low level near the ground. You can increase the imaginary height if the child desires more challenge. One by one children jump over "the rope" to safety. The reason for not using an actual rope is that the lack of a real one engages the imagination and reduces the likelihood of failing. It symbolizes a manageable threat coming towards them. This elicits spontaneous movements and gives the children the satisfaction of a successful escape.

Adapted Sports

Traumatized children often have difficulty moving between various levels of nervous system activation. For older children, almost any sports activity can be structured to practice self-regulation of the level of arousal and cooling down. The trick is to assist children to learn to recognize small tensions before they escalate. This can be taught in the following process:

- 1.** Proclaim a "Pause" (either the adult or the children themselves can do so)
- 2.** Track activation (agitation or excitement): use the colored cards, see below.
- 3.** Take 60 full seconds to calm and settle (allow more time if needed).
- 4.** Re-ground and re-center before resuming activity.

Modified football

To teach tracking sensations, you can make a large color-coded poster showing various levels of arousal. For example: green = calm, blue = OK,

yellow = beginning to sense irritation or excitement, orange = feeling tense, and red = about to explode. Then, someone blows the whistle at regular intervals during the activity, having all players self-assess and report their "color" before proceeding. The adult in charge guides the children to track their sensations until they are feeling "green" (calm) or at least "purple" (OK). Children who have difficulty can be given support through extra time, pairing with a calm buddy, or receiving guidance from a calm adult until they discharge their activation and are able to settle down. As the children become more skillful, the activity can be made increasingly challenging by adding the element of surprise. Simply, blow the whistle at irregular intervals.

3. Activities to build competence

Little groups can be set up for competence building, offering activities such as movement and dance, theater, martial arts, painting, music, exercise, journal or poetry writing, drumming, rap sessions, meditation. In fact, it depends on what you can do. The groups can make simple jewelry, do crafts, sing together, weave together, plan activities or strategize on how to make a difference or offer a community service such as local beautification, reading stories to young children or helping the elderly.

Neuronal connections for pleasure and security can only be strengthened through experience. Therefore, look for strong positive emotional experiences. They make it possible for the child to be receptive, rather than blocked. Witnessing and reinforcing the positive experiences changes the way children feel about themselves. The trick is to make sure that the positive bodily sensations (e.g. warmth around the heart) that underlie the emotions (happiness and pride) are given time to develop, be felt deeply and be expressed.

4. "Make-Believe" Play

In their play, children sometimes show us the parts of their experience which overwhelmed them. If your child plays aggressively with toys, setting up the same scene over and over, they may be trying to recover from a frightening situation. Through "guided play", you can help them move from repetition to resolution, to move beyond their fears and gain mastery over their scariest moments.

However, sometimes they don't show us their hurt in such obvious ways. For example, they may avoid any activity, person or other reminder of what

frightened them, act "bratty", cling to parents or throw tantrums. Or, they might struggle with agitation, hyperactivity, nightmares or sleeplessness. In other cases, they may act out their worries and hurts by wielding a false sense of power, steam-rolling over a younger, weaker child or a pet. And, sometimes they do not find an outlet of expression at all and their distress may show up as head and tummy aches or bed-wetting.

A note: The main idea here is to confront the child with the activating aspects of the traumatic event so slowly that it does not overwhelm them even more. With every gentle approach to the feared topic, follow the 3 to 8 steps of the First Aid.

A Guided Play with Sammy

A small Sammy is aggressive, trying to control his environment. Nothing pleases him, he displays a foul temper every moment. At night, he tosses and turns, wrestling with his bedclothes. Six months before that he had an accident and was taken to hospital. He was frightened and strapped down in a pediatric chair. We agreed to explore if there might still be traumatic charge associated with the hospital event.

We place Sammy's teddy-bear on the edge of a chair in such a way that it immediately falls to the floor. It is hurt and must be taken to hospital. Sammy shrieks and runs out of the house. The suspicion about the remaining traumatic charge is confirmed.

Sammy is gently brought back, frantically clinging to his mother. We assure him that we will all be there to protect the teddy-bear. We put the bear under a blanket and ask everyone for help. Sammy runs again, this time only into the next room. We follow him there. He hits the bed with both arms. "Angry, right"? I ask. He confirms with a look. "Sammy, ready to help the bear"? He runs to his mother, clinging tightly. "Mom, I am scared."

Without pressuring, we wait for Sammy to be ready to play again. Then, the bear goes under the blanket again and is held there, this time with grandma. Sammy is participating in their rescue. When the bear is out and safe, Sammy begins to tremble and shake in fear and then, dramatically, his chest opens in a growing sense of excitement and pride. (Here we see the transition between traumatic repetition and healing play.)

Always waiting for Sammy to be ready to play again, we all take turns and are rescued with the bear. Each time, Sammy becomes more vigorous as he

pulls off the blanket and escapes into the safety of his mother's arms. There is less clinging and more excited jumping.

Finally, Sammy is the last one to try. He becomes agitated and fearful. He runs back to his mother's arms several times before ready. Then, bravely, he climbs under the blankets with the bear. His eyes grow wide with fear, but only for a moment. Then, he grabs the bear, shoves the blanket away and flings himself into his mother's arms. "Mommy, get me out of here! Get this thing off me!" (The very same words he screamed in hospital.) We go through the escape several more times.

Each time, Sammy shows more power and triumph. Instead of running to his mother, he jumps excitedly up and down. In the end, Sammy achieves mastery over the experience that had shattered him a few months earlier.

Principles to Guide Children's Play Toward Resolution

- Let the child control the pace
- If you notice fear, constricted breathing, stiffening or a dazed demeanor, slow down. These reactions will dissipate if you simply wait quietly and patiently while reassuring your child that you are by their side and on their side. Usually, your child's eyes and breathing will tell you when it is time to continue.
- Experiencing fear and terror for more than a brief moment usually will not help the child to move through the trauma. Most children will take action to avoid it. Let them. At the same time, you are trying to bring them back to touch-into the challenging sensations and feelings. But without being overwhelmed!
- Take small steps: You can never move too slowly. Traumatic play is repetitious. Make use of it. The key difference between traumatic play and "renegotiation" is that there are small differences in the child's responses and behaviours, moving toward mastery and resolution. No matter how many repetitions it takes, if your child is responding differently (more excitement, more speech, more movements), he/she is moving through trauma.

Note: In addition to making up scenes with dolls and teddy bears, lots of different toys can be used. Kids love puppets and making up stories, which their puppets can act out (the healing process of getting out what is needed). This is especially important for children too frightened to work directly with what happened to them.

Puppets

Puppet play gives kids enough psychological distance from their problems, creating safety to express themselves freely. Children who have difficulty feeling and sharing their emotions can almost always have an indirect outlet through the puppets. Be spontaneous. Start with changing voices and get silly, have fun! After a time of unguided play, you can lead your child in a direction that helps him/her deal either with the situation that originally caused distress or with the behaviour that followed. For example, if your child bottles up feelings of anger by becoming sulky or depressed, show them how to express their feelings through the puppets (an angry alligator can gnash its teeth and loudly exclaim whatever is bothering him). On the other hand, if your child acts out his anger by hitting other kids or having tantrums, the puppet can stomp its feet and announce to the whole world what it feels like to be mad, without hurting anyone. This way, kids can communicate their fears, sadness and joy. They will begin to face the difficult emotions that have disempowered them. Also, not only emotions get expressed, but often children come up with creative solutions to their problems.

You can make the puppets. Some for the full hand, some for the fingers. Brown paper bags or socks can be used. Have your child use colored markers to make the face. Or, cut the eyes and mouth with scissors. For the stage, you can use boxes.

Miniature Toys

When given the opportunity to use their imagination, children will play for hours with small figures. As with the puppets, you can sit on the floor and participate. Watch how your child plays with the toys. Is she gentle and kind or rough and harsh? What kind of situations does she make up? Does he create hiding places, fight scenes or plays games of escape? After watching for a while, ask them, what role they want you to take. Watch to see if they incorporate any of the elements of the event (separation, accident, molestation, hospital visit, disaster). When kids play this way, creating with imagination and their hands, they relieve their stress and tension. The important thing is that they get to express and expel the energy bound up in their emotions. For pre-school children, a sand box can provide a great place to sit in and play with objects. In all forms of therapeutic play, the most important is the child having their world, feelings and creativity witnessed by a caring adult. Refrain from judgement and advice, it creates safety for expressing what is needed.

Dramatic Play, Dress-Up and Role Play

Like puppet play, dramatic play gives children the necessary psychological distance from their problems, creating safety to express their thoughts and feelings freely.

Joey was found tightly tied with a rope to the seat of an abandoned car when he was five years old. He needed contact with a safe adult to experience a sense of power, control and escape. With a therapist, they repeatedly played "the policeman and the robber". They went through chasing, grabbing, putting the therapist in handcuffs and tying her up. Until the boy tired of it.

Children who experienced frightening situations where they felt trapped, pinned down, attacked or any other way out of control need to have active restorative experiences. Also, this type of energetic play is that it evokes muscles involved with defensive postures and movements. Therefore, it restores a sense of strength and competence that was lost during overwhelm.

One empowering activity to help children develop healthy defences is to invite them to pretend to be their favorite animals. Encourage them to take on the characteristics and motor movements of those animals. They can growl, hop, jimp, bare their teeth, spring, rattle, claw, swim, slither, pounce or hiss. Making masks is an option. Children might confront a fire-breathing dragon and actively dodge the flames, run fast to safety or practice a slow motion soft landing on pillows or mats. The idea is that they are engaged in physical activity that creates the opposite sensations and feelings to those of helplessness and immobility.

5. Arts and Crafts Activities

Clay and Play Dough

Because of its malleability, as kids feel and shape the bits and pieces, it reinforces how things change. If they are able to form tiny clay people, encourage them to talk to the them, saying anything and everything they may not have the courage to say in person. They can even form the loved ones that are no longer with them due to death, separation or abandonment. Young children can simply make a lump and pound on it, wielding power over whatever it is that the lump represents.

Finger Painting and Drawing

Sensory experiences help children build a stronger sense of self. Finger-painting is a great way to express emotions and resolve difficulties. We have used finger-painting successfully with hyperactive kids. Some have become very calm and attentive to their projects and reported feeling better afterwards even though they were not able to describe their upset with words.

- ***Free form drawing:*** Ask children to pick a color and make some doodles (squiggly lines) to show how they feel at the moment. If they want to talk about the drawing, ok, but not necessary. Ask them to draw some more doodles using different colors as their moods change.
- ***Sensation Body Maps:*** Ask preschool to third-grade kids to lie down and trace their entire body with a marker. Help them make a coding key to describe sensations and emotions they feel using different colors and shapes (blue=sad, orange squiggly line= nervous, pink dots=happy, black=numb, purple curvy lines=energetic, red=hot and mad, brown=tight. Older kids can make a "gingerbread" person shape on a large sheet of paper. Next, they fill in the body map to indicate the location of any sensations and emotions they feel at the moment. Be sure to encourage the expression of both comfortable and uncomfortable feelings.
- ***Drawing What Happened:*** Have the child draw something that illustrates what happened to them. Don't give specific instructions, tell them to make the picture any way they want. Children will often involve angels, ghosts of cherished relatives and pets and superheroes to help them work through their trauma. The purpose is neither art nor accuracy, it is the release of pent-up energy. Artistic freedom often brings emotional freedom.
- ***Drawings of Worries and Fears and their Opposite:*** If drawing the incident does not bring your child a sense of relief, this structured drawing exercise can help. Have your child make two drawings on two separate sheets of paper. One drawing depicts a worry, fear or whatever prevents him from feeling good, the other drawing shows the opposite – something that brings a feeling of comfort, hope, godness, happiness, safety or ease. (Often, children do this naturally, they draw a disaster and afterwards they draw a rainbow.) It does not matter which drawing comes first, allow the child to decide. When finished, children can cover the "worry" drawing with the opposite and notice how the sensations and feelings change.

- ***Escape Drawings:*** Escape is a universal antidote for helplessness. This exercise will help build a child's confidence in their ability to identify and escape from scary situations. Ask your child to share how he/she managed to find safety after a challenging event. Or you might ask how he escaped or knew that things were ok again. Did someone help him or was he alone? Was he able to do anything to help himself? How did he signal grown-ups that he needed help? Have the children focus on:
 1. What action did they take to escape or find safety? Examples – moved to higher ground, made herself bigger to be seen/smaller not to be seen, walked, ran, hid, climbed, pushed, stood up on toes, cried for help, froze (freeze is not cowardly or weak, as it is often judged, it is a very important survival mechanism, very normal and sometimes the best possible), shouted, kept quiet, held his breath, made a plan, called emergency, waited, prayed, crawled, reached out, held on, pulled away, covered their head.
 2. Who or what helped them? Examples – a sibling, a parent, a neighbour, the ability to kick, scream or run, a rescue worker, tree climb, belief in a higher power, inner strength, a life vest, rope, the ability to keep quit and still. Then, have your child draw and color the "escape scene". Afterwards, have them look carefully at the drawing and find the part that brings them a feeling they like (examples – powerful, strong, comforted, loved, supported, warm, brave, proud, fast, clever). Finally, have your child locate the internal sensations that accompany these feelings. Allow plenty of time to savor them. As they do this, have them notice if the good feelings spread to other parts of the body.
- ***Drawing a Safe Place:*** Invite your child to close his/her eyes and rest comfortably, either sitting or lying down. Take the time to help them relax by bringing attention to the rhythm of their breathing. Then, ask them to find a places in their body that feel calm and places that might be tense or tight. Ask them what happens if they take a deep breath and exhale slowly, making the sound haaaaah once or twice before returning to normal breathing. When he/she feels sufficiently relaxed, have them imagine a special place where he/she feels completely safe. This place might remind him of a spot he already knows or can be totally made up from imagination. What's important is that your child creates this place exactly as he wishes. There can be animals, pillows, the loved ones, posters, etc.) After they had sufficient time to create the space, ask them to explore

it, as if they were walking inside. Next, have them find a comfortable place to relax in their space. If they cannot find it, invite them to make it up. Then, ask them to notice what sensations arise that let them know they are safe and have them describe exactly where in the body they know this to be true. Finally, after exploring the sensations of safety, have them draw and color a picture of their "safe place". If, after taking the time to create and explore the safe place, your child is stuck feeling fearful, have them tell you what worries them. Have them show you where they feel scared and where they feel safer inside. He/she can also draw one picture of himself/herself feeling happy and another feeling frightened. If the fear takes more room than the safety, find ways to help them feel safer and spend time developing "islands of safety" inside. This can be done by reminding them of a time they felt safe, showing a photo of somebody they feel safe with, giving them a favorite toy, holding, rocking, hugging or any safe touch that they respond positively to. You can also have them build their own hiding place with pillows and sheets or cardboard boxes and play hiding games.

- ***Drawings from Dreamtime:*** this exercise is especially useful when children report "bad dreams" and nightmares. Ask them to say what they remember about their dream. Then invite them to choose one part of the dream that stands out most vividly. After they draw it, have them tell about the various parts. Pay particular attention to the inanimate objects. It is important not to interpret the dream. Rather, encourage the children to imagine or pretend that they are the various objects and creatures in the drawing as they make the images come alive and interact with each other in drama or dialogue. Listen to the meaning they give to the symbols, and help them embody the various characters as they work their way through to process incomplete sensations, feelings, images, or thoughts. For example, if a child draws two warriors with swords walking side by side, ask him to imagine what it's like to be one of them—perhaps starting up a conversation with the other. The child can dramatize or simply report the actions and feelings of each. Be sure to notice and ask the child about the setting—desert, mountain, ocean, island, cliffs, city streets, outer space, etc. Often the child will draw both the problem and the solution in the same picture. Sometimes the solution is tiny or hidden at first—like the miniscule yellow dot that one child drew between a crack in a rock. When asked to tell about it, he said, "That must be a little ray of hope coming through."

Note: when the child is talking about the drawing, look for signs of both the traumatic incidents and evidence of resilience or restoration. Refrain from giving advice, making interpretations or judging. Instead, ask what the animals/people in the picture might be feeling. If there are objects, ask the child to tell you more about the objects and their relations to the other figures. Is the child in the picture? If not, ask if they ever feel the way the animals/people in the picture might feel. The key is to look at the drawing openly and with curiosity. You can learn a lot about your child's inner world.

6. Silly Fun Exercises That Relax the Brain

Horse Lips

With your lips loosely together, blow air vigorously between them. That's all there is to it! Repeat until your lips tickle. How this helps: It releases the tightness around the mouth, relaxes the brain stem, and makes you laugh.

Talking Funny

Press the tip of your tongue against your lower teeth. Relax your tongue so that it feels like it fills up your whole mouth. Now try to talk! Any topic is OK, from serious stuff to funny stuff to talking about your problems. Allow the fullest laughter you possibly can.

How this helps: It relaxes the tongue and the brain, causing the free flow of cerebrospinal fluid, which helps us to feel freer, more relaxed, and less bound up by our circumstances. It also helps us to laugh at our stories about ourselves, breaking up old repetitive patterns.

Yawning

Take a deep breath in. At the top of the breath, open your mouth wide, lift your soft palate, and make yawning sounds. If it doesn't work right away to evoke a real yawn, it means that you are trying too hard. Relax and do it again, this time without trying!

How this helps: Yawning relaxes your throat, palate, upper neck, and brain stem. It helps you to "come down out of your head" so that you can experience your sensations. It improves digestion by increasing saliva production. It also increases the production of serotonin, a neurotransmitter that tends to balance mood, calming you if you're hyper and lifting you up if you're feeling gloomy. And it helps balance the flow of cerebrospinal fluid, which helps keep the brain and spine flexible.

Jiggling

Stand with feet about hip-width apart and knees slightly bent. Bend and straighten your knees just a little. Repeat over and over again until you find the rhythm to "jiggling." Let all your bodily parts hang loose and flop or bobble to the rhythm of your jiggle. Let your limbs shake and internal parts jiggle. Let your brain jiggle, too!

How this helps: The jiggling supports the rhythms of pulsation, which support life, liveliness, and well-being. It relaxes the joints, pumps the diaphragm, and moves the bodily fluids vigorously. Jiggling also increases energy by stimulating metabolism and loosening us up when we feel stiff or rigid.

Humming

While this can be done in any position, learning to humm is recommended by first lying down comfortably. Create a voiced sound: Hmhmhmhmhmhm. Let the sound move through your body as a vibration. The key is to pay attention to the sensations of the vibration. They are more important than the sound. Allow the felt pulse of the sound (the vibration) to move throughout your whole body. The more relaxed you become, the further the sound will travel. See if it can move out into your arms and hands, down through your torso, and into your legs and feet. Let it move into your head and up into your brain. Hum and rest. Alternate between humming and resting. Eventually, as your body loosens, the vibration from the "hmhmhm" sound will move all through you!

How this helps: Sound moves by compressing and expanding whatever it is moving through. When you make the sound all through your body, the pulsation of opening and closing presses and awakens the body. Muscle, fluid, nerves, vital organs, and bone are all being massaged. As the sound moves throughout your body it dissolves blocks that are stuck, creating a wave-like pleasant feeling of all body parts being connected and working harmoniously, thereby improving body image.

Note: for optimal benefits, forget the struggle to do it right, it is supposed to be fun. Also, do only a little bit, staying mindful to the sensations. Resting time should be as long as the exercise period, giving the body the time to integrate new patterns.

7. Physical Activities For Healthy Defensive Responses, Boundary Setting and Group Cohesiveness

Because trauma overwhelms the nervous system, traumatized children often have difficulty moving between various levels of nervous system activation. They may be hyperactive with poor impulse control, or they may present as lethargic, spacey, or depressed. Any familiar game such as "capture the flag" and jump rope can be adapted so that concepts of activation and deactivation are present.

Activities need to be structured so that highly energized periods are interspersed with states of calmness, with sufficient time for settling. During the time set aside for settling (have the children sit quietly in a circle to rest and debrief), questions are asked for a show of hands, such as: Who feels strong now? Who feels weak? Who has energy? Who feels tired? Who feels hot? Who feels cold? Who feels good? Who feels sick? During both phases (the excitement and the settling), excess energy is automatically discharged. As children "chase," "flee," "escape," "make boundaries," "run to a safe place," and "feel strength and power in their limbs and belly," they are forming new neural pathways that support resiliency and self-regulatory capacities.

Because events that overpower happen quickly, children have few choices. Therefore, activities to prevent and heal trauma need to include the following elements: extended time to restore a sense of preparedness, a variety of choices to select from, and the chance to discover and build new skills.

The Sleeping Crocodiles

This game can be played with three to seven-year-olds.

- 1.** Divide the children into two groups: the crocodiles and the crocodile hunters. The crocodiles lie face down on a carpet pretending they are swimming or sunning themselves peacefully until they hear the hunters enter the "swamp" area.
- 2.** The hunters are instructed to sneak up on the crocodiles, carefully stepping over them and scurrying about while the teacher plays music. The crocodiles now pretend they are sleeping. They are told to settle down, close their eyes, and get very quiet with calm breathing so they don't get "caught." When the music stops, the hunters tag any crocodile that moves even the slightest bit or opens its eyes.
- 3.** The hunters change places with the sleeping crocodiles and play another round. Children who got "tagged" because they stirred, opened their

eyes, or made noise do not trade places. They practice being “sleeping crocodiles” again. Those who have trouble settling can be coached to calm down by an adult. (Gently place a warm hand on the child’s back and breathe slowly and deeply, transmitting your calm presence to the child. Remind the child that it’s time to settle down.)

The Parachute

Because the shape and size of a parachute brings children close together in a circle, it is a natural community builder. All that’s required is a piece of cloth (a bed-sheet) and two or three lightweight balls that are two different colors. These activities can be used with five- to twelve-year-olds.

1. Lay the parachute flat on the floor to delineate the space, and have children encircle the outer perimeter in a seated position. Next, have them make eye contact with one another and the adults who are strategically placed near the children who might need the most support.
2. Each child grabs the edge of the parachute and pushes and pulls, with emphasis on feeling the tension of the parachute and the strength of their individual muscles and collective effort. Because they are still sitting they can be instructed to notice the weight in their hips and buttocks as well as the strength in their upper arms as they pull. Make sure they are having fun!
3. Next, have them stand up and feel their feet and lower legs as they bend their knees to get a sense of their grounding and connection to the earth. With young children, you can have them stamp their feet and march in one direction as they hold on. With older children, have them bend their legs, lift the parachute, and make an elliptical movement with their arms, like “stirring the pot.”
4. Ask the children to notice the body sensations that they feel. Then, do a group check-in by asking, for example, “Who feels strong in their arms? Who feels strong in their legs? Who feels weak? Who feels tired?” and so forth.
5. Next, have the group (already standing up) make waves with the parachute. Instruct them to pay attention to feeling their strength. If some feel tired or weak, instruct them to feel the strength of the whole group together. As they flap the parachute, it activates their energy and level of excitement.
Note: At this point, not all children will be able to tolerate the pleasurable activation. If this is the case, the adults will need to help them recover their energy by resting and grounding, with attention put on their feet

and lower limbs. For the children who feel weak, look spacey, or complain of fatigue, headache, or stomachache, adults or more able children will need to help them. This extra support can be given by making eye contact, showing empathy, and then gently but firmly pressing their feet against the floor using your hands. If the child has a tummy ache, have them place their own hand over the place that hurts. Place your hand on top of theirs, pressing lightly to give support and warmth to the internal organs as you wait for them to relax and soften.

6. Next, have the children make waves again, but this time toss one of the balls on top of the parachute. The children work together to keep the ball bouncing up and down without falling off. To make this activity more challenging add a couple more balls, one at a time. It's kind of like the group is juggling together. Remember to have the children sit in a circle, recuperate, debrief by sharing sensations, and settle down.
7. Finally, have all the children run in place to feel the power in their legs, reground, and experience the flee response. When they stop, instruct them to make eye contact with others on the other side of the circle, saying "hello." Then they can all raise the parachute and run underneath, huddling together under the canopy, again making contact by saying "hello" in unison for even more bonding.

The Wolf Comes at Midnight

One of the factors that causes overwhelm is a lack of time to prepare and protect oneself. In this game, children get the opportunity to feel the oncoming threat in small increments. As the threat increases in a manageable way, they experience extra time to prepare and choose defensive maneuvers.

You need a tape or a chalk to make a designated half circle (with a wall behind) to represent the wolf's cave and designated safe places for the children to run towards. The parent announces that she is the wolf and goes to her cave (you can later appoint a child to act as the wolf). Next, the children gather around the wolf as she stands inside the half-circle with three to five feet of space in front of her. To make the game more thrilling the parent can wear a wolf mask and/or tail. This will help to differentiate the two roles.

Now the children are instructed to ask, "What time is the wolf coming?" The wolf responds in a deep dramatic voice, "THE WOLF COMES AT MIDNIGHT" while he bares his teeth. Some of the children will be trembling with excitement already. Then they ask, "What time is it now?" and the wolf responds, "EIGHT O'CLOCK." At this point, the adult carefully

monitors the kids to see if any children are overly excited or experiencing distress. Then, the wolf turns back into a teacher and suggests that it's time to take a moment to notice how they are feeling in their body. This gives the children a chance to switch their focus from the external threat to their internal sensations, thereby fostering nervous system discharge. They can be asked to notice their legs in particular and if they feel the urge to run. When the children are reasonably settled, the wolf stirs the pot of activation once again. The children can now ask, "What time is the wolf coming?" The wolf answers, "THE WOLF COMES AT MIDNIGHT." "What time is it now?" "NINE O'CLOCK. YOU BETTER GET READY!"

At this time, the adult needs to help the children to prepare a plan, rather than just run away. She might suggest that the children look around to orient to their surroundings, searching for a safe place. If a child needs a friend, he can look around to pick someone to help him escape. You might suggest that the children run in place or back and forth to feel the power in their legs as they prepare to run. This step is very important because it makes the children aware of the power they have in their bodies to execute a plan, rather than just blindly scattering in all directions. It also creates the time and space that were not available when the children were originally overwhelmed. This type of practicing builds new neural pathways in the brain that create more resiliency in the nervous system. Through play, children become more creative in choosing and experimenting with new escape options. This reduces anxiety over time.

Repeat the same process, hour by hour until you reach the midnight hour. When the children ask, "What time is it now?" the wolf replies, "IT'S MIDNIGHT... IT'S MY TIME." The wolf runs after the children as they scurry to their safe places. Once everyone is safe, the adult gathers the children close and asks them to notice and identify their sensations. Once everyone is settled, it is important for the teacher to ask, "Who feels safe now?" The final step is to have the children locate where inside themselves they feel safe and what the sensation feels like.

Spider Traps the Flies

This exercise is designed to give children a physical sense of their body's boundaries and sense of limits. It also helps to become aware of being approached from 360 degrees around them and to feel the excitement and empowerment of defending their space. Teacher designates areas approximately eight to ten feet in diameter using masking tape. One child is

selected to stand in the middle and be the spider. The other children represent the flies and surround the circle, standing just outside the designated boundary. When the child in the center is not looking, the other children step inside the circle, challenging his boundary, trying not to get caught. The spider in the middle tries to tag the children that enter his web. Those flies that are "captured" then join his team on the inside. The game ends when all the flies are inside the "spider's web." Repeat the game as often as desired.

Defending Your Tail

This fun game will help children to play the roles of both "prey" and "predator" simultaneously. They get to defend their own territory (body boundary) while "attacking" others. Each child will need a "tail" approximately three feet long. It can be a three-inch-wide strip of fabric or a length of soft rope. The tail is tucked into the child's waistband at the rear. The adult designates a boundary with a few "islands of safety" where the children can rest, such as trees, hula hoops, mats, or rubber bases used for sports. When the teacher says, "GO!" the children run after each other trying to capture the tail by pulling gently. The children are encouraged to find creative ways to defend themselves, such as sitting, dodging, turning quickly, or running to a designated safe place. The adult needs to monitor which children can orient and defend themselves with agility and which cannot. Some children may appear stiff, frozen, or distressed and not want to play this very active game. The teacher can help these children develop the necessary skills in several ways:

- 1.** Whisper helpful suggestions, such as turning their head to look behind and using their hands to defend themselves.
- 2.** Have a "buddy system" where a more able child holds the hand of another and they run away together.
- 3.** Use the Superhero Handicap Cards (can be used in any activity to level the playing field and to enable the struggling children experience a sense of competence (red=extra time, blue= invisibility, purple=extra strength, green=safety zone, orange= superhero, makes the approaching child weaker and slower).

Tiger Chases Rabbit

This game was used in trauma relief work with school-kids in Thailand after the devastating tsunami. All you need are two balls of different colors and sizes. This game is designed to simulate the flight response. Parents and teachers can rally to help the kids after a disaster. To start, the adults and children form a standing circle and then sit on the floor in that arrangement. The leader holds up one ball, saying, "This is the rabbit." Then the rabbit gets passed around the circle hand to hand, starting off slowly. The adults encourage the kids to gradually increase the pace. Soon participants begin to feel their sensations of anticipation grow as the rabbit runs from child to child. A parent then introduces a second ball as Mr. Tiger and starts the second ball chasing "the rabbit." The pace increases naturally as the children identify with the strength of the tiger and the speed of the rabbit and as the excitement of the chase escalates. The complexity of the game can be increased for older children by calling out a change in direction. The idea is not to win or lose but to feel the excitement of the chase and the power of the team effort to pass the balls quickly so as not to "get caught."

Next, the children rest. As they settle, the leader checks-in with them, asking for a show of hands to identify the various sensations they may be feeling. After playing this game for a while, have the group stand up and feel their legs and their connection to the ground so that they can discharge activated energy through their bodies. Those children who feel weak or lack energy can get extra support from an adult. For example, you might have the less energetic kids pretend they are bunnies; the adults hold their hands while helping them to hop by sharing their stamina and enthusiasm and seeing how high they can get them to hop, first with assistance and then on their own.

At the end of the play period, children need to be monitored carefully to make sure that nobody is frozen or shut down. If a child is rigid or spacey, an adult might do a grounding exercise with him until he becomes more present. "Push hands" – where the parent can give a little resistance while a child pushes his own hands against the adults' – can also be helpful in getting a child settled in the present moment.

Note: you can vary the animals depending on what children are familiar with.

8. Calming Activities

Focused Breathing

With eyes open or closed, children (11 years and up) simply follow their breath, carefully tracking the route, rhythm, and length of the inhale and exhale. They also notice whether or not pauses occur between the inhale and exhale. Next, they are asked to observe whether the length of the inhale/exhale is even or uneven, and what they notice about the pauses. There is no right or wrong way to do this. The exercise is designed to bring focus and awareness to the breath without attempting to change anything. Simply through observation, children notice how the breath changes, by itself, over time. They may also be invited to notice what happens with their muscle tension and other sensations as concentration deepens. Begin with an approximately three-minute daily routine at the start of a group activity. Work up to five to ten minutes (depending on the children's capacity) per day as a routine practice.

Hook-Ups from Brain Gym

This is a simple and effective exercise from Brain Gym that can be used with children who are disruptive in a group activity or having trouble calming down after a fight or verbal confrontation. It's a good idea to have children do this before asking them to talk about what happened. It takes only two to five minutes and decreases adrenaline production by bringing attention away from the survival centers of the reptilian brain.

Hook-ups are done by crossing one ankle over the other in whatever way feels comfortable. Next, the hands are crossed, clasped, and inverted. To do this easily, stretch your arms out in front of you and cross them, thumbs pointing down. Then, palms facing, interlock the fingers. Then roll the locked hands straight down and in towards the body so that they eventually rest on the chest with the elbows down. While they are in this position, direct children to rest the tip of their tongue on the roof of the mouth behind their front teeth. What do they feel?

V. Resources

In troubled times, it is essential to help children with resources, to help them see what makes them feel good, and to strengthen that. And, to find new resources.

Resources are whatever supports our well-being:

- Things that make us smile and feel good inside
- Things that make us feel strong and competent
- Things that make us feel safe and relaxed
- Things that help us feel connected with others

Examples of resources: external: family members, access to the natural environment, objects and other things that stimulate and/or comfort the senses, access to toys, music, books, construction and art materials, children's activity groups and playgroups for young children, volunteer groups for teenagers to improve the environment or based on common interests; internal: natural gifts or talents (science, music, art, languages or construction), energy, sense of humor, charisma, healthy constitution, or personal characteristics and spirituality that brings a sense of wholeness and peace through connecting to something greater than oneself.

Exercise 1:

You will need two pieces of paper and a pen.

1. Take one of the pieces of paper and fold it in half vertically. On one side, make a list of your external resources; on the other side, a list of your internal resources. If you're not sure where to put it, place it on both sides.
2. As you look at your list, notice which resources "jump out" as the strongest supports for you in times of stress. Take some time to focus on each, one at a time, waiting to feel what sensations and emotions emerge, and where in your body you feel them. Notice if you feel them as muscular strength, warmth around the heart, power in the belly, "grounding" in the lower body or pelvis, etc. List the feelings.
3. Notice if there are categories of missing or weak resources, such as few satisfying relationships or lack of spiritual center (spirituality felt in the body). Make a list of ways to try to enrich your life by adding resources to close the gap. For example, if you feel inadequate physically and have little companionship, you might join/ start a sports group or ask an

acquaintance to become a "walking buddy." If these activities prove to be a source of more connection to yourself and others, add them to your list.

4. Using the other piece of paper, make a list of your child's external and internal resources, or help an older child to create his or her own lists following Steps 1-3. Put * next to the resources that bring the most comfort during stress. Help your child to deepen their awareness of the sensations that accompany resources. Be careful not to impose your ideas on your child, but instead be open to their ideas and needs.

Exercise 2:

Drawing Pictures of Resources: After exploring resources with your child, have them choose and draw a picture of something that helps them cope. Next, have them recall the most recent time they did the selected activity and notice how it makes them feel inside. To deepen this experience, have them close their eyes in order to better describe and locate in what part of the body they feel those sensations. Younger kids can just point to the places inside that feel good.

A very important resource is the ability of our body's sensations to change. For example, if you feel tension in your shoulders and place your awareness there long enough, they might just relax on their own. Next, you may notice the emotion of anger, coupled with an image of something that happened a long time ago. As you sit with these sensations, noting that they are coming from inside you (not the current outside), it is likely that there will be a shift in your muscles from rigidity to flow. An idea may emerge regarding reasonable steps to complete any unfinished business or it could be that as the sensations shift, the issue will become a non-issue and gently release. To sum up, this ability to move from helplessness to empowerment, which may have been lost in trauma, can be restored and the natural rhythm of contraction and expansion can replace the shutdown and overwhelm.

VI. Separation, Loss and Grief

Whenever there is trauma, there is grief. Grief is the emotion that accompanies loss. Whether the loss is material, such as a home or personal possessions, or something intangible, the sense of the world as a safe place is gone.

The symptoms of grief and trauma are different. When a child experiences deep sadness – such as with the death of an old and ill relative, it is easier, and often helpful, to talk about it. With shock-trauma, the child is left speechless. If someone dies right in front of a child's eyes, the grief becomes complicated by trauma. Because the death is unexpected and dramatic, the feelings and images cannot be assimilated at once. The horror needs to be worked through so that the shock of it can be released from the child's body and psyche.

The distinction between trauma and grief is important. While sadness is easy to recognize, traumatized children often suffer silently. They may display behavior problems or headaches and stomachaches that their parents do not link to the stress that they are going through. Because of this, the children may be ignored or punished for "misbehavior" or misdiagnosed with an elusive medical problem. Another reason to know the difference is that the tools to help your child work through the initial shock reactions are different from those used in the grieving process.

When children are assisted to come out of a shut-down, traumatized state, they can start grieving. When they are not, they may easily get stuck in the past. Although the pain of loss cannot be avoided, it can be felt, expressed and moved through. Helping children untangle shock (the 8-step guide) from grief and navigate the turbulent waters of death is the main goal of this chapter.

Helping the Child to Grieve

When children go through unwanted change and disruption in their lives, they may experience many confusing and conflicting feelings. For example, they may feel anger, hurt and fear. Other emotions that may be expressed (or suppressed) include emptiness, rage, disappointment, loneliness, sadness and guilt.

Grief is not something that happens only if a person dies. Grief is a sense of loss and sorrow when someone or something we cherished is gone forever.

For children, the most common sources of grief are separation from parents, death of a grandparent, parent or another relative, the loss of friends and the loss of their home or special possessions.

The grieving process is not linear. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross delineated the stages that we go through when we are grieving. These stages will be passed through, visited and revisited by your child at various times. Just when you think that he/she is no longer sad, the feelings pop-up again. This can be particularly true on anniversaries, holidays and other circumstances that serve as reminders of the loss.

The first stage of grief is denial or disbelief. A deeper shock reaction frequently occurs at this stage. If this is the case, you will need to assist your child to move out of the frozen state by helping him/her identify and feel sensations until they shift and change (see the 8-step guide).

The next two stages deal directly with emotions. In stage two sadness and grief will emerge. Stage three involves feelings of anger and resentment. Stages two and three (in particular) tend to alternate for a while. They also include emotions such as irritability, frustration, emptiness, disappointment and worry. There is nothing more difficult than being separated from someone you love. Being upset is a normal part of the grieving process! When your child is able to express feelings, it is a good sign he/she is moving out of immobility, helplessness and fantasy of the first stage. Your job is to help make a safe "container" to hold your child's heartbreak and anger. Bargaining is the fourth stage of grieving. At this stage it is important to help children maintain a strong sense of self – a sense of confidence that they can handle the pain in the here and now, instead of making a futile attempt to change the circumstances by wishful thinking to bring back the past. This is the stage of pining in which you hear: "If only I had...." or "If I would have, could have or should have, maybe this terrible thing would never have happened." It may also involve making deals: "If I pray harder or do my chores, please make him come back. „This stage is similar to the first stage – denial. It is denial with a little more thinking, blaming and guilt. Again, at this stage it is important to help the child move through the sensations that accompany the thoughts in order to avoid getting mired down in shame and guilt. Your child can be encouraged to express genuine remorse for what she wishes she had or had not done before the person died or left, and then let it go. The final stage of grieving is acceptance of the reality of what happened, together with the willingness to go on with life to the fullest extent possible.

Steps That Help Children Resolve Their Grief

Besides moving through sensations of shock and the emotions of grief, you can use the following exercise to help your child say good bye to a loved one.

Exercise: Grief Recovery

Depending on your child's tolerance level, work maybe with only one part at a time or even a bit less.

Part A

1. Make a timeline starting from the date you first met that person until their death.
2. Write several happy memories that stand out as highlights of your relationship above the horizontal timeline in chronological order.
3. Add a few things above the line that you truly appreciated and wish you had told your loved one when he or she was still alive.
4. Write below the line several things that your loved one did that upset you.
5. Add several regrets below the line for things you did that upset your loved one.

Part B

List the memories you wrote under the following headings:

- Things I miss about my loved one
- Things that hurt me that I'd like to forgive now
- Things I feel guilty about that I'd like to be forgiven for
- Things that I appreciated and never said aloud or frequently enough

Part C

Sharing Your Thoughts, Memories and Feelings

Share the lists you made with someone who loves you and will understand. Ask this person or group of people to help you by listening to any feelings that may surface as you complete this set of exercises.

Part D

Saying Good-bye

When you feel ready, compose a special letter for your loved one. Use the memories you listed to express anything you want to say. Don't hold back. It

is valuable to balance your letter with things that helped you and things that hurt you. Express gratitude for experiences and feelings that you wish to say "thank you" for. Be open to your shortcomings and theirs. Forgive anything that you feel you want to forgive. Be honest. Don't force yourself to forgive certain things that you don't want to, but be sure to take this opportunity to forgive the things you do. Most of all, forgive yourself. Ask your loved one to forgive you for anything you feel ashamed of and wish you didn't do. Now is the time to come clean so that you can say goodbye without anything holding you back.

For a child:

This letter can be very hard to write. Have someone you love help you if you cannot do it yourself. But be sure to express your own thoughts and feelings, not someone else's. If you are too young to write all those big words, you can have an older person write your words for you. If you can do it all by yourself, you still might want a friend or relative to keep you company in case you have strong feelings that come up. You might want a hug, or someone to hold you if you cry or someone to share your memories and feelings with. In the final line of your letter you tell your loved one "good-bye."

Part E

Sharing Your Letter

When you feel ready, read your goodbye letter aloud in front of someone you can trust with your private thoughts and feelings. Then you might want to have a ceremony and bury or burn your letter. Or you might have some very creative ideas of your own to complete the process of grieving.

Note: a similar process can be used to say good-bye to a home.

Giving Emotional Support

Whether children are grieving a death, separation or loss of some other kind, they will experience a range of different emotions. Young children may not have labels for their feelings. Older children and adolescents may not want to talk about it. One activity that is particularly helpful is the "gingerbread person" exercise (see the activity chapter). After the sketch and color code are finished, the child simply fills in the outline with various colors to show how they feel in different parts of the body. For example, they might color the heart area blue, the feet and hands red, and the tummy yellow. Drawings like this help in two ways:

1. The sensomotoric act of drawing helps to relieve the feelings through artistic expression as it engages the intuitive right side of the brain.
2. The process gives you valuable information about what is troubling your child and what feelings still need to be expressed and listened to with compassion. Sometimes children will draw their uncomfortable emotions first. As they start feeling better, they may shift and draw pleasant feelings. Feelings can be worked through using clay and paints as well. Clay or playdough is especially good for expressing anger, since it can be pounded on, rolled and reshaped any way the child wishes.

Often children (and adults!) are embarrassed about their feelings. They also try to hide their feelings, because they don't want to cause their parents additional pain. This is especially true in the case of separation or when a sibling, spouse or grandparent dies. In such case, the parent(s) may be going through their own painful emotions. It is OK for adults to cry together with their children. In fact, it is important to tell your child that tears, fears and anger are a normal part of the grieving process. Modelling your own healthy emotions without embarrassment can help. Crying tears can release a great deal of pain and stress.

It is critical, however, that you do not burden your children with your ongoing suffering or overwhelming feelings of anxiety, depression, rage or sobbing (extremes do not bring relief). Try to get help from your friends and/or counselors if your own grief is not resolving.

It is important to ask your child often how he/she feels and what he/she thinks. However, sometimes, they are not ready to talk about their emotions. Try again later, giving them many opportunities to share with you and unload their burdens.

Many adults find it easy to hug and comfort a sad child, but find it difficult to deal with a mad one. It is normal to get mad when someone you love leaves. It is important to let children know that mad feelings are normal, too. They may need to talk about it, stomp their feet, draw or write about it, tear up some paper or take a walk. Some children may want to be left alone for a while to work through their feelings on their own or talk with peers. This is especially true for teens. Just let them know that you are available to them when they are ready.

Children become afraid when they don't know what is going to happen next, they need to know how they will be affected. You can avoid a lot of catastrophic worry by providing the details of how your child can continue contact by

phone, mail or visits to relatives that are still in their lives. Providing telephone numbers, addresses and emails to encourage connections can help your child feel more at ease. Encouraging calls to grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins are important! Keeping a connection with extended families often gives kids a sense of continuity that helps them cope better.

When children's lives go through upheaval, they may ask hundreds of questions. Why can't Dad live with us? Why did Grandma have to die? Why did Mom leave? Will she come back? Why can't things be different? You may not be able to answer all the questions. But if you assure them again and again that you are aware of their sadness, frustration, hurt, anger, and that you are right there to listen, hold them, tell them a story or plan ways to make their new life as comfortable as possible, you can support them in the process of grieving and accepting life-changing losses.

Grief Groups for Children

Grief groups can ease the pain and isolation the youngsters feel. They are a safe place to work through the emotional memories, to grieve, release pain and renew life together. They can lighten a heavy load. When children share in a group, they create friendship bonds and a sense of belonging as they comfort one another. The adults in such a group need to have the skills to help with both grief and shock, the shock often prevailing. Whether the child loses a relative or a friend, they need to complete the grieving process so that they can move forward. Grieving children can share all their emotions, make memory books, light candles and read letters they have written to the deceased. Listening to (and being listened to) others going through the same hurt is a very powerful and moving experience. Also, it is a great way to learn empathy, compassion and responsibility.

VII. Anger

Finally, there will be the anger. The brain of a traumatized person responds in a dramatically different way compared to the brain of people who are not traumatized. Brain scans show us that for a traumatized child the perceived threat is not processed through dual signals sent to the higher and lower brain simultaneously. Instead, only one channel activates—the amygdala awakens the reptilian survival brain, while the higher neocortical brain activity that can think and reason lies dormant.

So, it is very normal that a child will respond dramatically to a rather minor stimulus. Sometimes we cannot even notice any. In such a situation, children need soothing words and a person who possesses self-control and confidence. Yes, you have the power to de-escalate a hostile, frightened child. Take an upright posture and speak calmly, in a firm voice, to help the child out of the mess, saving their face as much as possible.

An example would be: "You are out of control. You got angry so fast when..... (name the specific situation). It must have really startled, annoyed etc. you. It is ok now, it is over. I will help you now to settle down."

The power of presence, tone and words can truly help, whether spoken to an outraged child or a violent criminal on the loose.

Guidelines for De-Escalating Explosive Situations:

- Take a deep breath, take one step back, and ground yourself first. Let your energy settle into your feet and lower legs, feeling the support of the ground.
- Remind yourself that you know what to do because you have memorized this list.
- Adopt a soothing tone of voice; raising your voice provokes more adrenaline!
- Avoid threatening behaviors or gestures.
- State the behavior you observed without shaming or exaggeration, despite the temptation.
- Show that you understand your child by reflecting her overwhelming feelings.
- Avoid threatening punishment.

- Make a statement that shows the child that he/she is not alone; this will assist him/her in calming down.
- Make a statement that shows that the relationship between you can be repaired.
- Make a statement that gives a choice to save face.
- Make a statement that states the misbehavior without chastisement.
- Make a statement that shows the correct behavior, and/or what can repair the infraction.

Thank you for the effort!

Children are our hope for the future!



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